

College football's

breakout players

Sporting News

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Baseball @ the half

HOLY COW!

Big Z and the killer Cubbies
are halfway to heaven

Our exclusive MLB survey

The players' picks: Best player,
pitcher, manager and more

Chicago ace
Carlos Zambrano

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Week of July 14, 2008



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Kansas' Dezmon Briscoe
is about to bust out.
Who's with him?

SportingNews
MAGAZINE

THIS WEEK

COVER
STORY

> BASEBALL @ THE HALF

16 What to do for an encore?

The Rays are in first place. The N.L. is the power league. If baseball's second half is going to be anything like its first, we'd be crazy to try to predict what will happen next.
By Ryan Fagan and John Rawlings

26 The survey says ...

When it comes to ranking their peers, major league players can field the tough questions ... and their answers might surprise you.
By Ryan Fagan

> NFL

38 A quick learner

The Patriots are finally serving youth at linebacker, and Jerod Mayo has the fast feet—and mind—to make an immediate impact. *By John Tomase*

> COLLEGE FOOTBALL

44 Stud alert

These guys have teased us with potential. Now they're ready to break out in a big way this fall.
By Matt Hayes

KNOW IT ALL

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- 7 **On Deck** Star-studded festivities at Yankee Stadium. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5.**
- 8 **Your Turn** Getting to know Charlie Weis—for better or for worse—and some bad vibes about Ichiro and the Knicks.
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- 56 **EXPOSURE**



Don't rush to your mailbox next week—because **SPORTING NEWS** won't be in it. We're taking a cue from baseball and getting in a short vacation. But don't worry. We'll be back, and we'll have everything you need to get ready for NFL training camps in our next issue.

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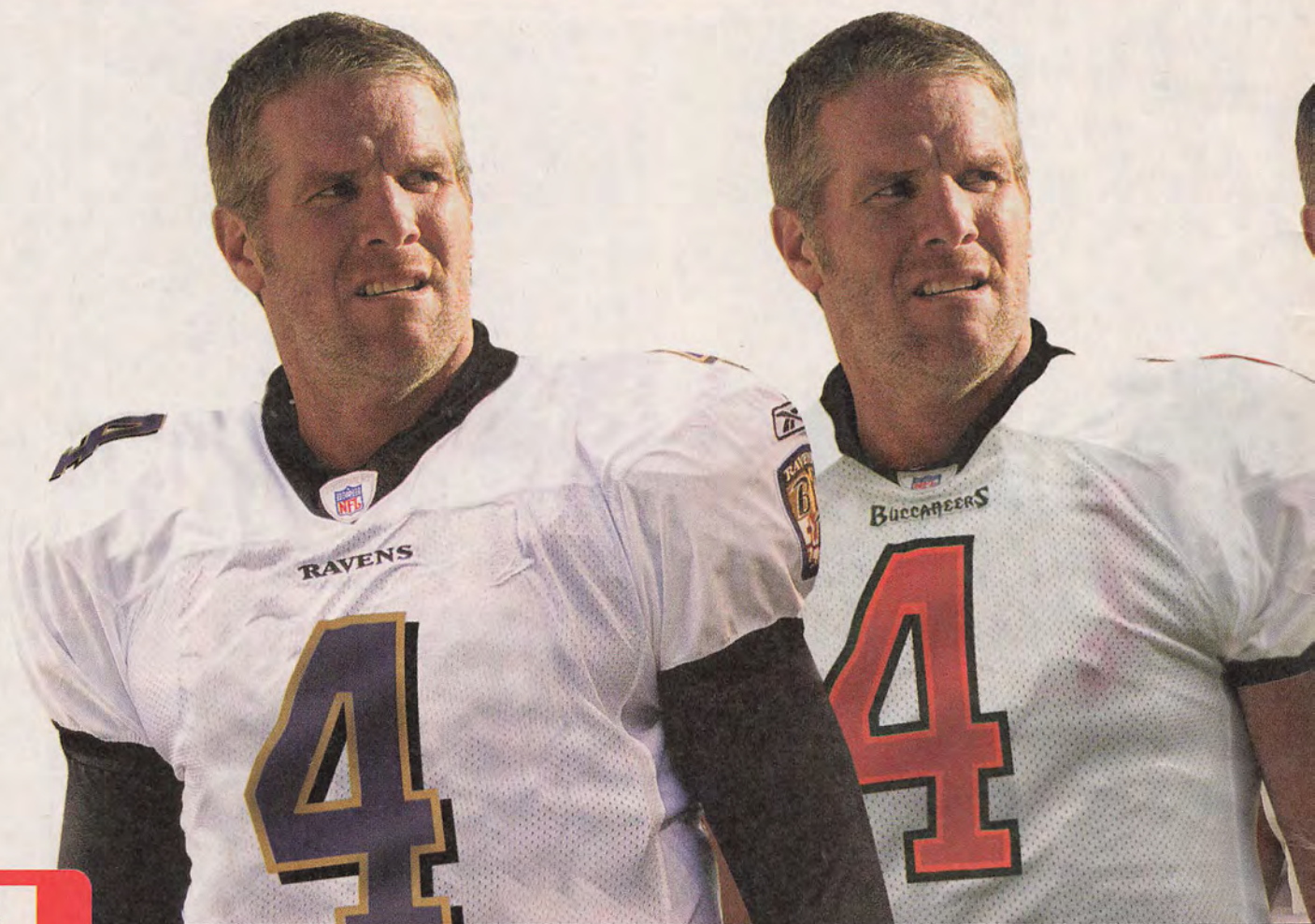


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TO **KNOW** LIST

6 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

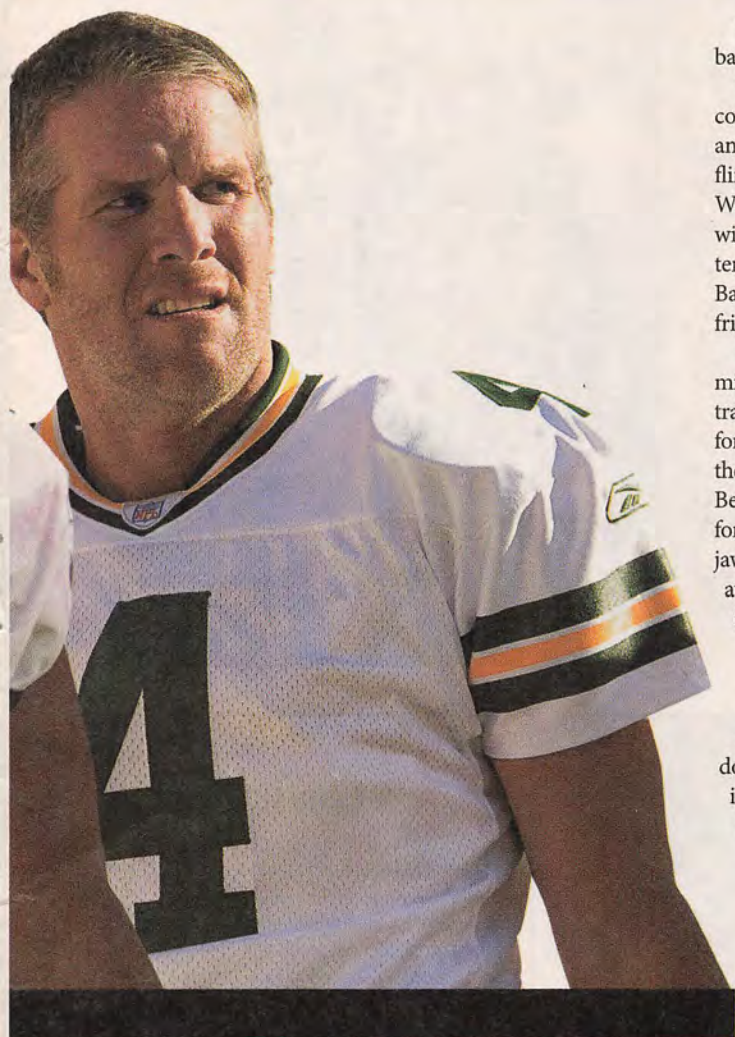


Same number, very different look ... maybe.

1

THE
MAIN
EVENT

A Packer 4-ever? Not so fast



Have you heard? Brett Favre wants back in. Maybe.

The 38-year-old god among men could, like Joe Montana, Joe Namath and Johnny Unitas before him, have a fling with a new team. Baltimore or Washington might be a rocket arm with a steady hand from playoff contention. Same for Carolina or Tampa Bay, which would add warm, joint-friendly weather to the mix.

But why stop at teams the Packers might actually (buzz kill alert) consider trading Favre to? If Green Bay chose—for no logical reason—to release Favre, the hated Vikings and the despised Bears would claw each other's eyes out for a shot at the sandy-haired, iron-jawed legend. Or at least they'd huddle at their respective HQs and talk about it. Maybe.

Hey, it's fun to think about. And Favre has always been synonymous with fun.

Except the mere mention of his name doesn't quite ring in the good times that it used to throughout Packerland. The team's general manager, Ted Thompson, a former special teams grinder with the Houston Oilers, believes steadfastly that no player—even the most famous man in the history of the state—should be allowed to hold up the

works as an emotionally drained Favre has done the past three offseasons.

Packers coach Mike McCarthy, who tried in March to talk Favre into returning for a final season, has since gone well down the road in restructuring his offense to suit the first-round skills of fourth-year quarterback Aaron Rodgers. And Rodgers, who presumably is as ready as he'll ever be to take the reins, would be "devastated" by a Favre comeback, according to a team insider, and likely would look for a new team himself as soon as possible.

Even Packers fans—the most skeptical of whom would have slid bare-chested across the frozen tundra this time last year if it would have helped to persuade Favre to keep chasing that second Super Bowl ring—are beginning to wane in their support. In a poll last week on the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's* website, more than one-third said ol' No. 4 should just stay away.

Favre's "legacy" is his own to mind: He is a football addict—as all the great ones are—so no one should be surprised if he tries to wring a few more throws out of that right arm. With a new team, that is. Fun? Yes. And weird. And, as Montana, Namath and Unitas learned, probably not bound for the glory of his younger days.

—Steve Greenberg

PHOTO BY ALBERT DICKSON / SN; ILLUSTRATION BY JACK KROVINE / SN

NEW SERIES PREMIERE JULY 17TH

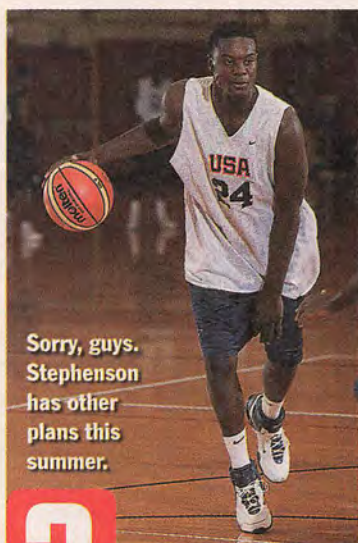
WRECKED
LIFE IN THE CRASH LANE™

THURSDAYS 10PM ET/7PM PT

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Sorry, guys. Stephenson has other plans this summer.

2

IN THE SPOTLIGHT:
SUMMER RECRUITING

Sizzle without the steak

Although lately much of what you hear about recruiting concerns the nation's finest middle-school players—right, Kentucky fans?—college coaches began their annual ritual of stalking the top high school talent last weekend as the NCAA's summer evaluation period officially began.

For the rest of the month, they will pick their way through nearly 200 NCAA-certified events. This week's big tournament is the Nike Peach Jam in North Augusta, S.C., which runs Saturday through Tuesday.

However, some of the coveted targets figure to be missing. Four of Scout.com's top 15 players have been competing for spots on the United States' U-18 national team, including much-publicized New York small forward Lance Stephenson. Another, guard Dexter Strickland of Elizabeth, N.J., will miss the month with an injury.

And there's more sad news: After watching a 2008 class last summer that was uninspiring, the coaches will be observing a 2009 group that is, frankly, more of the same. There may be some fine college players out there, but there is no LeBron James, no Greg Oden and probably not a Kevin Durant or Michael Beasley, either.

You never know unless you look, though. —Mike DeCourcy

3

COUNTERPOINTS

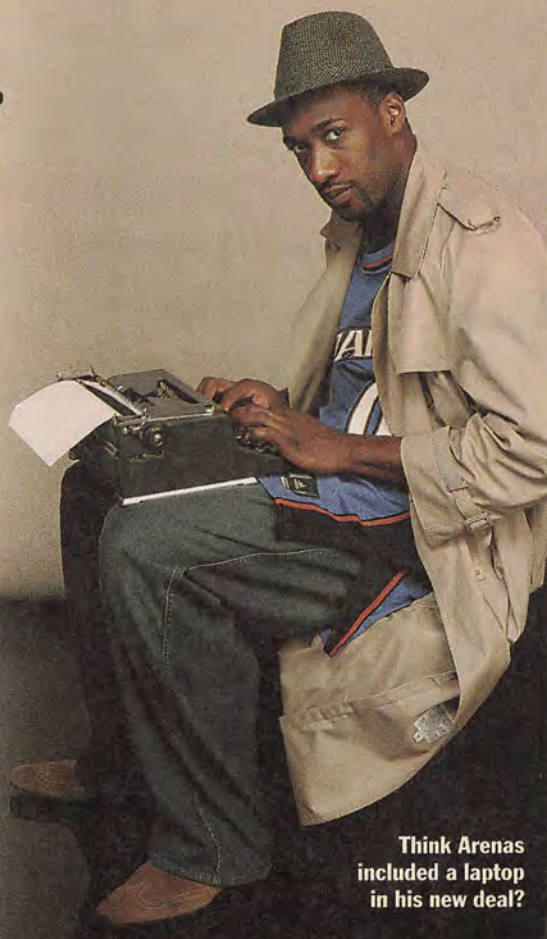
To blog ... or not to blog?

"If you have a blogger like me who's honest and really doesn't care what you think, then (blogging is) a good thing because people want to hear the truth. You give your readers an insight of your life and what's going on. It's a risk. But if they hate you, they're going to hate you for telling the truth, and I can live with that. The bad part is that you can kill yourself with your own sword."

—Wizards point guard and blogger Gilbert Arenas in his most recent post on NBA.com

"Gilbert Arenas is as entertaining and lovable a character as the NBA has, but the Wizards have made him their franchise. They need him to morph into a lead-by-example type. That might not be in his nature. But there are 111 million reasons he needs to change that. That means rolling back on the blogging and the outrageous comments. As a member of the media, it's tough to say this, but it's true: Gilbert has got to make himself boring."

—NBA Insider Sean Deveney, after Arenas agreed to a six-year, \$111 million deal with the Wizards last week



Think Arenas included a laptop in his new deal?



4

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

30

World (nine) and U.S. (21) records shattered at the U.S. Olympic swim trials last weekend in Omaha. Backstroke specialists Aaron Peirsol and **Natalie Coughlin** led the way with two world records apiece.

5

QUICK CLICKS

A tasty ringtone

If you can't get enough of Shaq's rap skewering of former teammate Kobe Bryant, you're in luck: Now you can hear it every time your phone rings. Sort of, anyway. Go to funmo.com/funtones/330705 for a free remix inspired by Shaq's rap. You won't hear the Big Diesel's big baritone, but his classic line (you know the one) is there—with a twist.

6

IT BEARS REPEATING

'Alex Rios has the best arm in baseball, but he has no idea how to use it.'

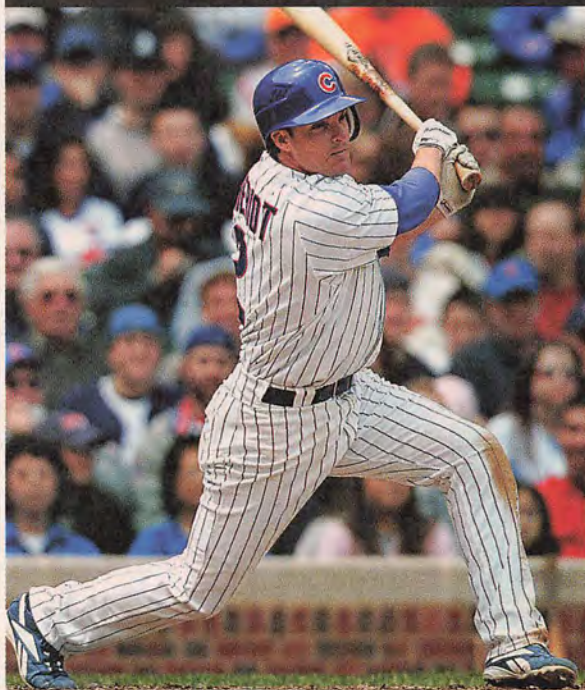
—An A.L. player on the Blue Jays' right fielder. For the results of our midseason player survey, go to page 26.

ON DECK

All times Eastern

>>>>>>>>> The week ahead in sports

PICK of the WEEK



MON 14

Theriot won't be in the Home Run Derby ... but maybe he should be.

All-Star Game Home Run Derby (8 p.m., ESPN). A-Rod has already said he's out of the derby, so here's a fresh idea for this steroid-free era: Instead of having the big boys mash homer after homer deep into Yankee Stadium, let's throw the Juan Pierres and Ryan Theriots of the world out there and give a million bucks to the first guy to reach Monument Park with one swing.

SAT 12 The Sprint Cup moves under the lights at Chicagoland Speedway for the **Lifelock.com 400** (8 p.m., TNT). Tony Stewart, who won last year's race, is in the top 12 right now, but getting his first 2008 win would make him a little more comfortable.

SUN 13 Those of you who keep up with first-round draft picks, top prospects and minor league studs will know these names well. But for the rest of the baseball-watching country, the **Futures Game** at Yankee Stadium (12:30 p.m., ESPN2) is the first chance to meet tomorrow's All-Stars.

TUE 15 To recap: Starting players selected in a fan popularity contest compete in the **All-Star Game** (8 p.m., FOX) to determine which team gets home-field advantage for the most important series in the world. Y'know, the World Series. Yep, baseball still has some fine-tuning to do.

THU 17 **British Open opening round** (7 a.m., TNT). Well, here we have it—a major without Tiger Woods. The course, Royal Birkdale, has eschewed adding distance in favor of another 20 bunkers and tightened fairways for this year's championship. Will anyone on this side of the pond even notice?

—Ryan Fagan

BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 The All-Star Game. This could be the old Stadium's last blast, unless 1) the Yankees reach the World Series or 2) Cynthia Rodriguez and Madonna bump into each other in the players' family lounge.

2 The NBA. Ronald L. Johnson, the new head of officiating, is a recently retired Army major general, which by my count gives him exactly two more stars than the Golden State Warriors.

3 Penn State. Apparently, Joe Paterno is telling recruits that his successor will come from the current coaching staff. Does that surprise you? I mean that there is a current coaching staff?

4 Dario Franchitti. Chip Ganassi shut down the No. 40 team in part because he got half the driver he was expecting, and judging by the results it clearly wasn't the *Fran* half.

5 July. It just seems like half the country is away on an extended vacation, when in reality it's really just half the N.L. West.

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101 CARS YOU MUST DRIVE

MONDAYS
9PM ET/10PM PT

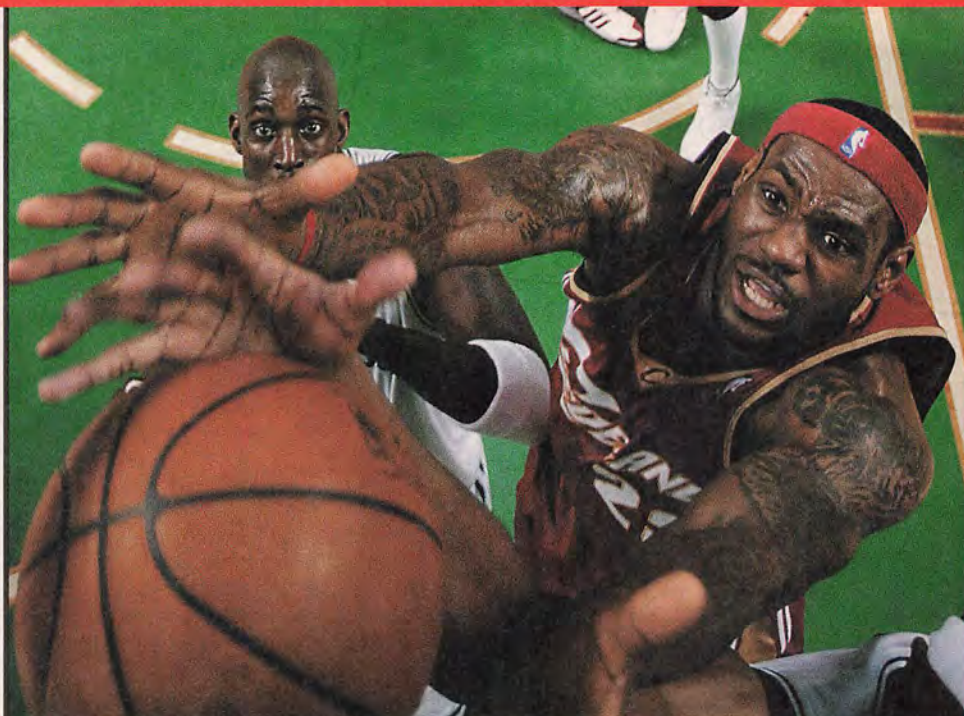
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Comedian **Alonzo Bodden** takes you for an irreverent spin in 101 cars that have made history. Join the Last Comic Standing winner and experience these amazing cars in all their glory. It's the good, the bad and the unexpected.



YOUR TURN

>>>>>>>>> You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.



If I were God, I would lengthen the nose by one inch of anyone perpetuating the myth that **LeBron James** is headed to New York or New Jersey (SN, July 7). That way, they'll all be duly noted when he stays with the Cavs.

—JuannieBoy via SportingNews.com

■ I had to laugh when Knicks fans booed like lunatics after the team drafted Danilo Gallinari. Even though Isiah Thomas is long gone, the stupidity continues. Donnie Walsh needed to hit a home run for his first draft with the Knicks but slapped a long single instead. That pick deserved an "F" in my book. —Flashjeff via SportingNews.com

■ Dear Warriors: I've got a bad back, I can be stunningly arrogant at times and I like basketball. Can I have Baron Davis' \$17.8 million? —TageRyche via SportingNews.com

■ Thank you for the article on Charlie Weis (SN, June 30). It was an excellent behind-the-scenes glimpse that showed the human side. Too often we form opinions of these individuals based on replays and sound bites and equate good or bad with their won-loss record. I am not a Charlie Weis nor a Notre Dame fan, but SPORTING NEWS certainly has won points with me. —David Bauer via e-mail

■ When Charlie Weis got to Notre Dame, he

was quite arrogant and it rubbed people the wrong way. He has now been humbled, and I think he will be a better coach for it. Evidently, he has always been a good man ... just not good at letting people see that. —LSUSMCR via SportingNews.com

■ There is a shortlist of people who don't hate Charlie Weis: those from South Bend and those from New England (from his coaching days with the Pats). After putting Weis on the cover over the NBA champion Celtics, you can take New England off the list. For the rest of us who can't stand Weis, I just wanted to say thanks for

shortening the list. —John Stahl via e-mail

■ Kudos to Sean Deveney for cracking the seal on the "Everyone loves Ichiro" jar (SN, June 30). The Mariners will never be a real team as long as Ichiro is on the roster. He gets preferential treatment that is probably similar to what Barry Bonds had in San Francisco. He also distances himself from fans and the press. —John Groshell, Fall City, Wash.

■ Thanks much for the update on Joe Marciano and his adopted son Joseph (SN, June 30). Way to go, both Joes. —Jim Stommen, Alpharetta, Ga.

■ The Cubs are cruising in the regular season with the hope of reaching their first World Series in 63 years. But there is a chink in their armor: Though they are nearly unbeatable at Wrigley this year, they have a losing road record. With the rule designating that the winning league in the All-Star Game merits home-field advantage in the World Series, a loss by the National League could very well be a death knell for the Cubs. —Steve Fanter, Escondido, Calif.

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on *Sporting News Radio*

'The Tampa Bay Rays are one of the best stories baseball has seen in some time. With all the young, exciting talent on that team, it's no wonder they have the best record in baseball. People who doubt them will start to come around when the Rays are still in first place in August.' —Jim in Pensacola, Fla., on the Matt Spiegel Show

POLLING PLACE

Will the N.L. win its first All-Star Game since '96?



BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: THE GREAT DEBATE

Posted by Keeper0

Which is better: pro sports or college sports?

Obviously, there are great arguments on both sides. It really comes down to personal preference. Many advocates of collegiate superiority point to the college atmosphere as the determining factor. "Us" and "we" just seem to take on a larger meaning in a college stadium. There is such a sense of community among college fans. People feel a connection to their school and fellow students. If you're on vacation and see someone wearing your school's logo, it's a conversation starter. College sports require more of an emotional investment.

RE: MEMORY LANE

Posted by bigtoke

The top 10 events ever at Yankee Stadium, site of this year's All-Star Game, as it winds down its final season:

10 August 16-17, 1948. For two days after Babe Ruth passed away, his body lay in state at the entrance to Yankee Stadium.

9 June 13, 1948. In a teary farewell speech, Babe Ruth, near death, makes a final appearance at Yankee Stadium.

8 November 9, 1946. Notre Dame's Johnny Lujack tackles Army Heisman Trophy winner Doc Blanchard short of the goal to preserve a 0-0 tie in a matchup of two of the greatest college football teams ever.

7 June 22, 1938. Boxer Joe Louis avenges an earlier loss to Max Schmeling in front of 70,043 fans.

6 September 30, 1927. Babe Ruth hits home run No. 60 off Washington Senators pitcher Tom Zachary.

5 October 1, 1961. Roger Maris tops his famous counterpart, the Babe, with home run No. 61.

4 November 10, 1928. Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne delivers a motivational halftime speech ("Win one for the Gipper") for the ages. The Irish storm back onto the field and beat Army, 12-6.

3 October 18, 1977. The Yankees' Reggie Jackson clubs three home runs on three pitches off of three different Dodgers pitchers in the World Series.

2 October 8, 1956. Yankees pitcher Don Larsen throws the only perfect game in World Series history.

1 July 4, 1939. Lou Gehrig, doomed by disease, delivers a very special farewell speech to the fans. The grace, courage and humility of a dying man marks the greatest moment in the history of Yankee Stadium.



It's hard to argue with anyone picking Lou Gehrig's farewell speech as the best Yankee Stadium memory.

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SPORTING NEWS RADIO

Some love for the little guys

Marlins right fielder **Jeremy Hermida**

On the first half

It's been fun so far. We've kind of clicked a little bit on all aspects of our game. Our starting pitching has been great for us, and our offense has been putting up some runs. We've put ourselves in position the first half of the season to be able to make a second half push at the playoffs. We're just taking it a game at a time, but we're definitely having a good time doing it.

On winning without much fanfare

The market we play in down here and being young guys relatively new in the league, that's going to happen. We don't take that as a personal thing at all. We kind of enjoy it sometimes. It's fun to go out there and be a little bit under the radar. We're a very loose group of guys and have a great time playing the game and a great time in the clubhouse, and I think that shows.



Twins reliever **Joe Nathan**

On his team's season

Any time you're playing every day, playing 162 games, you're going to have the ups and downs, the roller-coaster ride. When you do have the ups, you've got to go out and take advantage of every opportunity you get. It seems like right now, even when we fall behind three runs, these guys find a way to scratch and claw and get a couple runs across and give ourselves a chance at the end of the game. We're definitely utilizing every opportunity right now and getting as much as we can out of everybody.

On the A.L. Central race

The White Sox have been playing very well. We're just trying to keep up with them and see if they can slow down a little more for us.

On being a smaller-market team

Guys come in and play with confidence. It doesn't matter how much you're getting paid. (You have to) have a belief that you can play with the big-market teams. That's (why) we always preach going out and playing this game hard and taking extra bases and moving guys along when we can, and pitching and defense. That's the name of the game. We know if our confidence is good with those aspects of the game, we can play with anybody.



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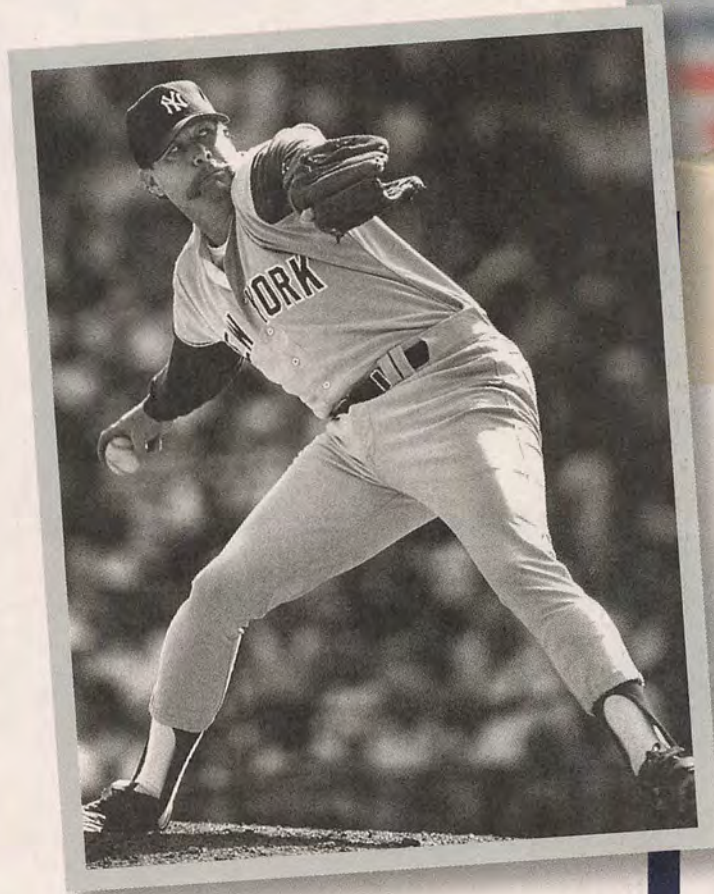
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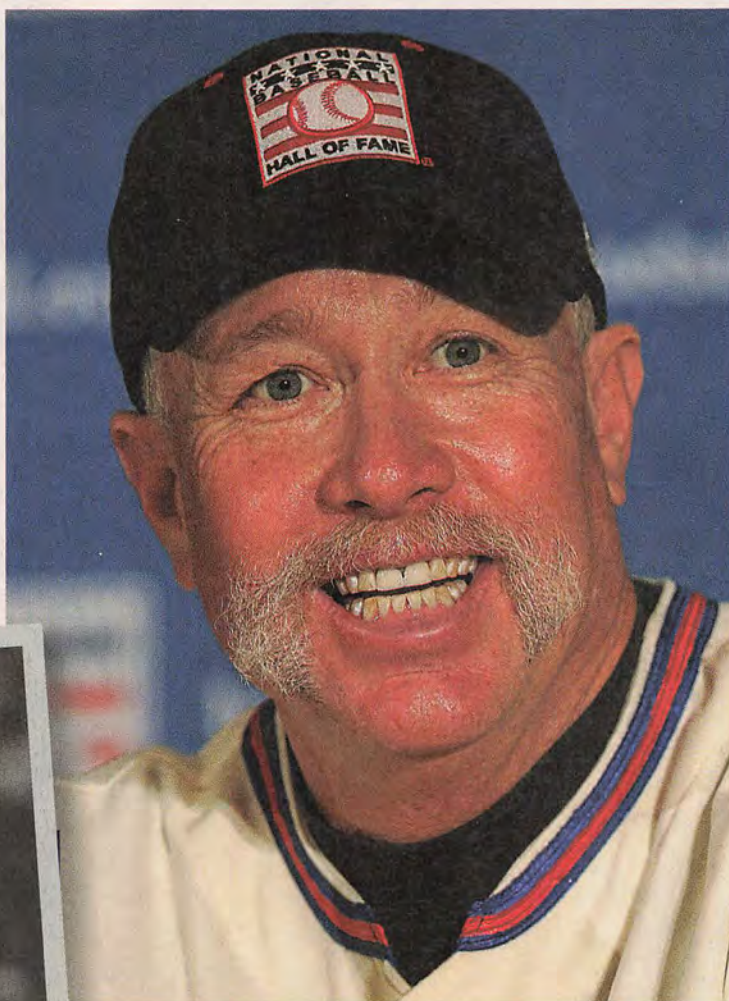
GOOSE BUMPS

Rich "Goose" Gossage will be inducted into the Hall of Fame on July 27. Gossage, elected by the baseball writers in his ninth year of eligibility, compiled 124 victories and 310 saves for nine teams from 1972-94. He took a break from preparing his Cooperstown speech to talk with SPORTING NEWS' Gerry Fraley.



SN: Do you wake up every morning and say "I'm a Hall of Famer"?

GOSSAGE: It has not sunk in yet. This is so overwhelming, and it gets more overwhelming. I really don't think I'll ever be able to comprehend this. Everybody treats you differently—in restaurants, in airports, just walking down the



street. That feels weird. I've never put myself on a pedestal. This isn't going to change me. I grew up here (in Colorado Springs) and have the same friends I've always had.

SN: What does being a Hall of Famer mean to you?

GOSSAGE: There was some frustration and disappointment along the way. I always said I didn't have to take a back seat to anybody in the Hall of Fame that was a relief pitcher. To be in the Hall means that in terms of relief pitching, you have to be as good (at your trade) as a guy like Tiger Woods. It's good, but it's humbling, too. (Hall of Fame reliever) Bruce Sutter called after I got voted in and said, "Our bullpen just got better." That really meant a lot to me.

SN: How do you feel about wearing a Yankees cap on your Hall plaque?

GOSSAGE: I loved every minute of every team I played for, but putting on the pinstripes did something to me that no other team did. I put so much pressure on myself with them, especially early in 1978 (when he lost three times in the Yankees' first six road games). I'd come to the mound and (catcher Thurman) Munson would say, "How are we going to lose this one?" After we won (the American League East), George (Steinbrenner) called it the greatest comeback in his-

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'I would have loved to have been used like the modern-day relievers. It's hard to tell what my statistics would have been.'

tory. I thought to myself: "It wouldn't have been if I hadn't put us in that hole."

SN: You join Dennis Eckersley, Rollie Fingers, Hoyt Wilhelm and Sutter as the only closers in the Hall. Why have closers been given so little attention?

Gossage: It's taken some time to sort it out, especially with relievers from my time. Eckersley and those guys, I consider them the modern closers. We weren't called closers. We closed from the sixth and seventh inning on and sometimes came in for the fifth. I loved that workload. I think I really shined in tough situations when you just had to get a strikeout.

SN: Do any current relievers remind you of yourself?

Gossage: I don't pay attention to every team, but the guy in Boston (Jonathan Papelbon) might be the closest. I don't think anybody goes after the hitters like I did. I was always coming into situations that called for strikeouts. Those (1,502) strikeouts I had,

let me tell you. There was no padding in those numbers.

SN: Can you see a time in which closers again pitch two or more innings for a save, as you did 125 times in your career?

Gossage: Not a chance. If I had had my choice, I would have loved to have been used like the modern-day relievers. It's hard to tell what my statistics would have been. I was doing the work of three guys now.

SN: Steroids were not an issue during your career, but they will be an issue in future Hall of Fame voting. How should accomplishments from the steroids era be viewed?

Gossage: Maybe we can put this behind us and give (the Baseball Writers' Association of America) a defining path in how you should vote for these guys. I'm glad the Mitchell Report was done. There's too much at stake with all the great players who were on a level playing field. I can't say this is a level playing field.

SN: How are you doing with the acceptance speech?

Gossage: It's going to be from the heart. I owe so much to so many people. People like Ray Berres, my minor league pitching coach. I could not have met Johnny Sain, Chuck Tanner and Dick Allen with the White Sox at a more crucial time in my career. There isn't anybody I'd rather go in (the Hall) with than Dick Williams, my manager at San Diego. Everybody that I ran into in the game was a blessing to me.

Gossage has company

Five others, chosen by the veterans committee, also will be enshrined at Cooperstown this month.

■ **Barney Dreyfuss.** The longtime Pirates owner played a key role in the creation of the World Series—his Pittsburgh team played in the first one, in 1903—and saw his 1909 and 1925 teams win the Series.

■ **Bowie Kuhn.** Commissioner from 1969 to 1984, he got baseball through a tumultuous period when free agency came about and players-union squabbles were the order of the day.

■ **Walter O'Malley.** The pioneering owner's relocation of the Brooklyn Dodgers to the West Coast after the 1957 season helped usher in a new and prosperous era for the game.

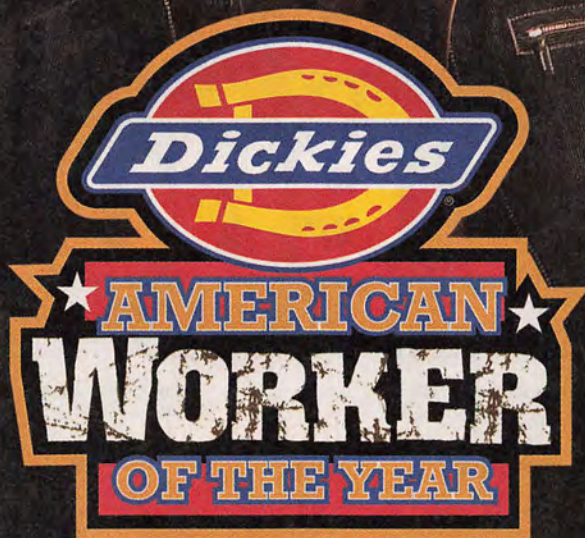
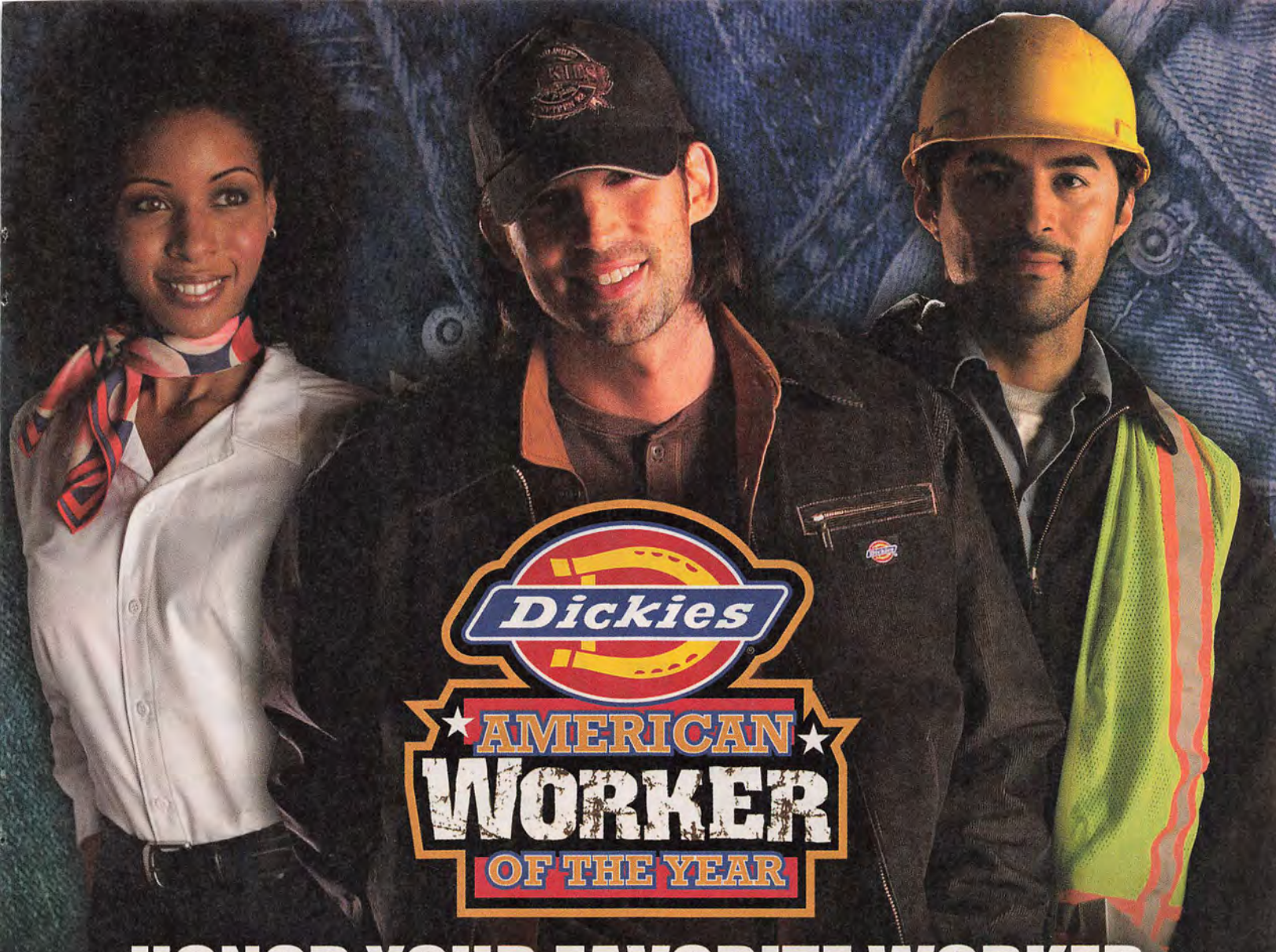
■ **Billy Southworth.** The only Cardinals manager to win two World Series, his St. Louis teams won 97, 106, 105, 105 and 95 games from 1941-1945.

■ **Dick Williams.** He managed the A's to World Series crowns in 1972 and 1973 and also took Red Sox and Padres clubs to the Series. —Joe Hoppel

Their time is coming

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Lock				
Rickey Henderson. Best leadoff hitter in history. All-time leader in runs scored (2,295) and steals (1,406).	Roberto Alomar. The No. 1 second baseman of his era. Hit .300 and won 10 Gold Gloves in 17 seasons. Barry Larkin. Batted .295, scored 1,329 runs and played a brilliant shortstop in 19 years with the Reds.	Jeff Bagwell. Hit .297 with 449 home runs and played a key leadership role in 15 years with the Astros.	None	Craig Biggio. Had 3,060 hits with 291 homers, plus four Gold Gloves at second base, in 20 seasons with the Astros. Mike Piazza. The best-hitting catcher ever (a record 396 homers at that position); his offense more than overcomes mediocre defense.
Worthy of consideration				
David Cone Mark Grace Mo Vaughn Matt Williams	Andres Galarraga Edgar Martinez Fred McGriff	Kevin Brown Juan Gonzalez Rafael Palmeiro Larry Walker	Bernie Williams	Barry Bonds (among the best hitters in history, he will have more voter support than you might think, despite his alleged steroids use) and Roger Clemens (a steroids-related cloud, too). —John Rawlings





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What to do for an encore?

The Rays are in first place. The N.L. is the power league. If baseball's second half is going to be anything like its first, we'd be crazy to try to predict what will happen next. *By Ryan Fagan and John Rawlings*

Somewhere in this great land of ours, oil and water are mixing, cats and mice are eating lunch together and Democrats and Republicans are sharing ideas openly and honestly.

That must be the case because the craziness can't be limited to America's pastime, right? The first half of this season has produced more "can you believe that?" stories and "did you see that?" moments than should be possible, even in an entire 162-game schedule. It's almost enough to make baseball fans forget about the steroids cloud hanging over the game. Almost.

The Rays—sans the *Devil*—and the Cubs—sans the excuses—both held baseball's best record in the latter part of June. The Angels lost a game despite not allowing a hit. Justin Duchschere, a former reliever who missed the last 4½ months of the 2007 season with a hip injury, is starting and leading the American League with a 1.96 ERA. Major league owners are considering implementing instant replay, for crying out loud.

And on and on we could go. Actually, don't mind if we do.



Longoria hit eight home runs in June—not too shabby for a rookie.

>>> The rise of the **RAYS**

Righthander James Shields knew from the first day of spring training that there was something about this year's Tampa Bay team. "I've been in this organization for eight years, and I've never seen anything like that," Shields says. "It's always been kind of a negative attitude, but this year it was unbelievable. This year we had something like 40 guys, two weeks before spring training, working out. Normally, we'd have seven or eight."

The scrappy Rays, who had the worst record in the majors last season, entered July with this season's best record. A mix of sage veterans (Cliff Floyd and Troy Percival), an impact rookie (Evan Longoria) and maturing youngsters (Carl Crawford and B.J. Upton) has created a solid give-and-take clubhouse. It helps, of course, that a dynamite rotation—featuring Scott Kazmir, Shields, Matt Garza and surprising Andy Sonnanstine—solves a lot of the problems on the field.

"This used to be a destination of entitlement and scholarship, whereas now you have to earn the right to be here," manager Joe Maddon says. "And when you do get here, it's not like you can just win one or two games and then relax and it's going to be OK. Now we expect to win every night."

More often than not, the Rays do just that. It has taken a while for people to believe this team's for real, but it's gaining converts by the truckload. Even in Tampa Bay, shockingly, where attendance figures that have long hovered in the 15,000 range are starting to climb.

>>> The best **WIN-WIN** deal ever?

One of the great baseball debates was renewed by an innocuous offseason trade between the Reds and Rangers: Which is more important to a team, a dominant starting pitcher or a run-producing slugger?

Josh Hamilton already had written one of the most inspiring comeback stories in baseball by the time he was shipped to the Rangers for righthander Edinson Volquez. Hamilton had overcome years of drug and alcohol addiction to hit 19 homers in an injury-plagued 2007 season for the Reds; Volquez, who has electric stuff, had struggled mightily in three auditions over three seasons with Texas.

The premise was simple: The Reds needed a power arm to pitch in their ballpark of a home ballpark; the Rangers needed another bat with power potential. The trade worked out better than either team could have hoped.

Hamilton had 11 multiple-RBI games in April and hasn't slowed down. He leads the majors with 83 RBIs and is tied for second in the A.L. with 19 home runs. Volquez allowed one or zero earned runs in each of his first eight starts and has a 10-3 record and N.L.-best 2.24 ERA.



>>> A **DISASTER** in Houston

Aside from Lance Berkman's phenomenal first half, not much has gone right for the Astros. Ace Roy Oswalt is stumbling along with a sub-.500 record and career-worst 4.60 ERA, and a 4-18 stretch ruined a solid start and effectively crushed any thoughts the team had of making the play-offs.

The sinking season reached a low point when, on June 25, a confrontation between general manager Ed Wade and demoted starter Shawn Chacon ended up on the clubhouse floor when Chacon grabbed Wade by the neck and threw him there. Chacon was released and cleared waivers, but the incident is far from finished. The players association has filed a grievance on Chacon's behalf.

>>> **DOWN**—and **UP** in Motown

Just one step short of coronation before the first pitch was ever thrown, the Miguel Cabrera, Dontrelle Willis and Edgar Renteria-enhanced Tigers lurched to an 0-7 start and faced the daunting task of even making the playoffs. But an 18-4 June revival lifted the Tigers over .500 and put them in hot pursuit of the Central Division-leading White Sox.

"I'd never seen a team react in a negative fashion toward expectations like this team," Tigers first base coach Andy Van Slyke said during the early swoon. "I don't want to say (the team was) scared, but it was very uptight. Everybody said we were supposed to be so good and score 1,000 runs and we couldn't do anything for that first month. But our pitching has given us a chance now."

The Tigers reached their low point on June 6, when they dropped 12 games under .500. The team ERA was 4.82, its batting average .258. Since then, those numbers are 3.74 and .304.

Manager Jim Leyland pitched a well-reported fit at one point, prompting Van Slyke to observe, "He's been volcanic at times." But Leyland is more docile these days. "We're just playing the way we're capable of playing," he says. "We've got a good team."

>>> **CHANGES** at the top

Talk about a reversal of fortune.

In 2007, the West produced the two highest win totals in the National League (90 each for the Diamondbacks and Rockies). The N.L. Central, on the other hand, didn't have a team reach 86 wins in either of the past two seasons.

So, of course, the 2008 Central Division boasts the three top win totals—Cubs, Cardinals and Brewers—in the N.L. and the West-leading Diamondbacks are two games under .500.

Hamilton wasn't exactly a steal. Turns out the Rangers gave up quite a bit to get him.

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>>> The **BLABBING** G.M.

General managers are well-versed in media-speak. They'll throw out the clichés and standard answers, especially when doing a live radio or television interview. That's why J.P. Ricciardi's inability to self-censor on a Toronto call-in show was so shocking.

The Jays' G.M. was asked why he wasn't interested in Reds slugger Adam Dunn, whose name had been widely discussed in trade rumors across the league. "We've done our homework on guys like Adam Dunn, and there's a reason why we don't want Adam Dunn," Ricciardi said. "I don't want to get into specifics."

And then he did get into specifics. Ricciardi questioned Dunn's love of the game and criticized him for striking out too much.

Dunn, obviously, was not happy. Ricciardi, obviously, looked foolish. That wasn't a smart move for a general manager whose seat already was pretty warm.

>>> **SINKING** in the Central

That loud thud near Lake Erie was the Indians' season crashing to earth. Cleveland suffered two indignities in the same game on June 25: losing to

Ankiel continues to be downright happy to be wearing a batting helmet.

>>> A minor **MIRACLE** in St. Louis

Like all managers, Tony La Russa has his flaws. He just hasn't shown any of them this season.

His Cardinals have the second-best record in the N.L., much to the surprise of everyone outside the St. Louis dugout. The patched-together rotation has been among the best in baseball—props to pitching coach Dave Duncan. Center fielder Rick Ankiel's bat and glove are making people forget about his pitching arm. Albert Pujols has been his ever-dominant self.

It seems easy to discount this team's first half success as a fluke or as a squad playing over its head. But at some point the Cardinals will have to be acknowledged as a good team.

Giants lefthander Barry Zito, who was 2-11 entering the game, and dropping into last place in the A.L. Central behind the Royals. It marked the latest the Indians had been in last place since June 25, 1993; that club finished 76-86.

How a team with so much potential—the Indians were one win away from the World Series last fall—could drop so fast defies explanation. But the struggles of DH Travis Hafner, the injuries and power decline of catcher Victor Martinez and the early-season struggles of Cy Young award winner C.C. Sabathia, now a Brewer, are a good place to start.

The one nice surprise has been pitcher Cliff Lee, who is a gaudy 11-1 with a 2.26 ERA—after going 5-8 with a 6.29 ERA last year and spending part of the season in the minors.

"Who would have thought they meant Lee when people talked about the lefty Cy Young guy in Cleveland?" says a veteran scout. "He doesn't look like he should get anybody out and he gets everybody out, at least so far."

>>> An unlikely **POWER SHIFT**

The American League has the reputation as the masher league. Not the case this year. Nine of the top 10 home run hitters in the major leagues play in the N.L.

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>>> What a RELIEF

You probably pegged Ryan Dempster and Justin Duchscherer for 18 wins combined—over the whole season. But they have reached that number in the first half.

Both righthanders moved from the bullpen to their teams' rotation with startling results. The A's Duchscherer leads the major leagues with a 1.96 ERA and has a 9-5 record. Dempster is 9-3 with a 3.24 ERA for the first-place Cubs.

"I worked my butt off," Dempster says. "Not to brag, but I felt I worked as hard as anybody in the entire major leagues in the offseason. I didn't want to come back and be an average starting pitcher."

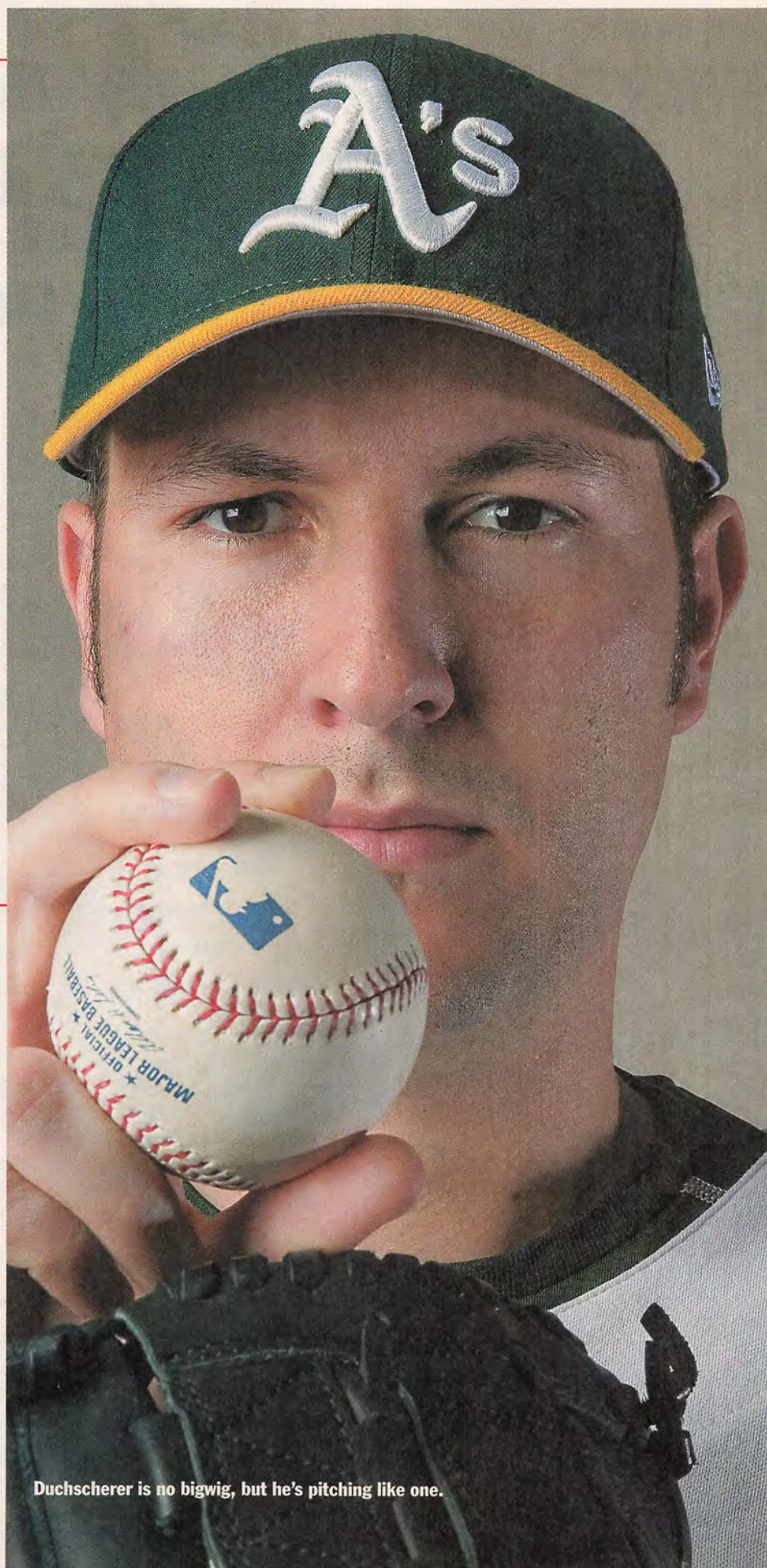
Duchscherer is as modest as Dempster is determined. After a recent performance that drew a standing ovation, "I heard the fans a little bit, but I don't want to act like I'm a bigwig," he told reporters. "I just don't feel like I'm Roger Clemens or Nolan Ryan, so I don't feel like I'm in the position to tip my cap or anything."

>>> A FISH story?

After the Marlins shipped slugger Miguel Cabrera and lefthander Dontrelle Willis to Detroit, most folks figured their chances to contend in the N.L. East were kaput. Not so.

Led by the double-play combo of Hanley Ramirez and Dan Uggla, the Marlins have been in first or second place all but three days this season. Whether the Marlins have staying power in the N.L. East race remains to be seen, but they will chase a major league record into September.

First baseman Mike Jacobs (18 home runs), second baseman Uggla (23), shortstop Ramirez (21) and third baseman Jorge Cantu (15) could become the first-ever infield with four 25-homer players.



Duchscherer is no bigwig, but he's pitching like one.

FROM LEFT: JAY DROWNS / SN; BOB LEVERONE / SN

McLouth hits just a little bit harder when he's not looking over his shoulder.

>>> **CARPE** diem

Finally given the chance to play every day without fear of being sent to the bench or back to the minors, two outfielders—the Cardinals' Ryan Ludwick and the Pirates' Nate McLouth—have delivered breakout performances. Both already have eclipsed career highs in homers and RBIs—Ludwick has 16 and 57; McLouth has 15 and 53—and likely will earn their first trips to the All-Star Game.



>>> Leave the man **ALONE**

Milton Bradley says all he really wants is to play the game without being hassled. For the first part of this season, the Rangers' DH/outfielder has gotten his wish. While Josh Hamilton was stealing the headlines, Bradley went about the business of being a very good ballplayer.

A few unflattering remarks by Royals television announcer Ryan Lefebvre raised Bradley's ire in mid-June, but cooler heads prevented the incident from getting completely out of hand. And it hasn't affected Bradley's on-field production. He's battling for the A.L. lead with a .320 average and he leads the league in OPS (1.039).

>>> Forever **YOUNG**

The new Boss dissed the old pitcher early in the season, and now Mike Mussina can gloat about his 11 wins, which is almost double the combined total of young Yankee studs Joba Chamberlain, Ian Kennedy, Phil Hughes and Darrell Rasner.

Mussina has reached the 10-win plateau for the 17th straight season, extending his A.L. record. It's the third time in his career and the first since 2003 that he has reached it within 15 starts. His resurgence has helped the Yankees remain within striking distance of the Rays and Red Sox in the A.L. East.

Scouts say Mussina's changeup and curve are the best they have been in New York and that Yankees fans shouldn't get too excited about the return of Hughes and Kennedy, who have spent time on the D.L. and in the minors. Hughes and Kennedy are a combined 0-7.

An advertisement for the Dickies American Worker of the Year contest. It features three people: a woman in a white shirt and red scarf, a man in a black Dickies work jacket and cap, and another man in a yellow hard hat and safety vest. The Dickies logo is prominently displayed in the center. Below the logo, the text reads "AMERICAN WORKER OF THE YEAR". At the bottom, it says "HONOR YOUR FAVORITE WORKER WITH A CHANCE TO WIN \$1,000,000". The promotion ends on August 15, 2008, and the website workeroftheyear.com is listed. The background is a dark, textured blue.

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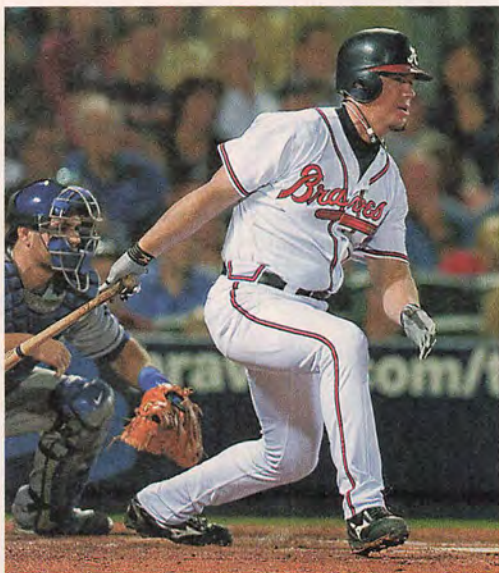
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Promotion ends August 15, 2008.
Official rules and list of prizes are available at

workeroftheyear.com

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>>> Keeping up with JONES

Braves third baseman Chipper Jones was hitting .421 on June 6, but a pulled quadriceps and the law of averages took their course and he has dropped to .385.

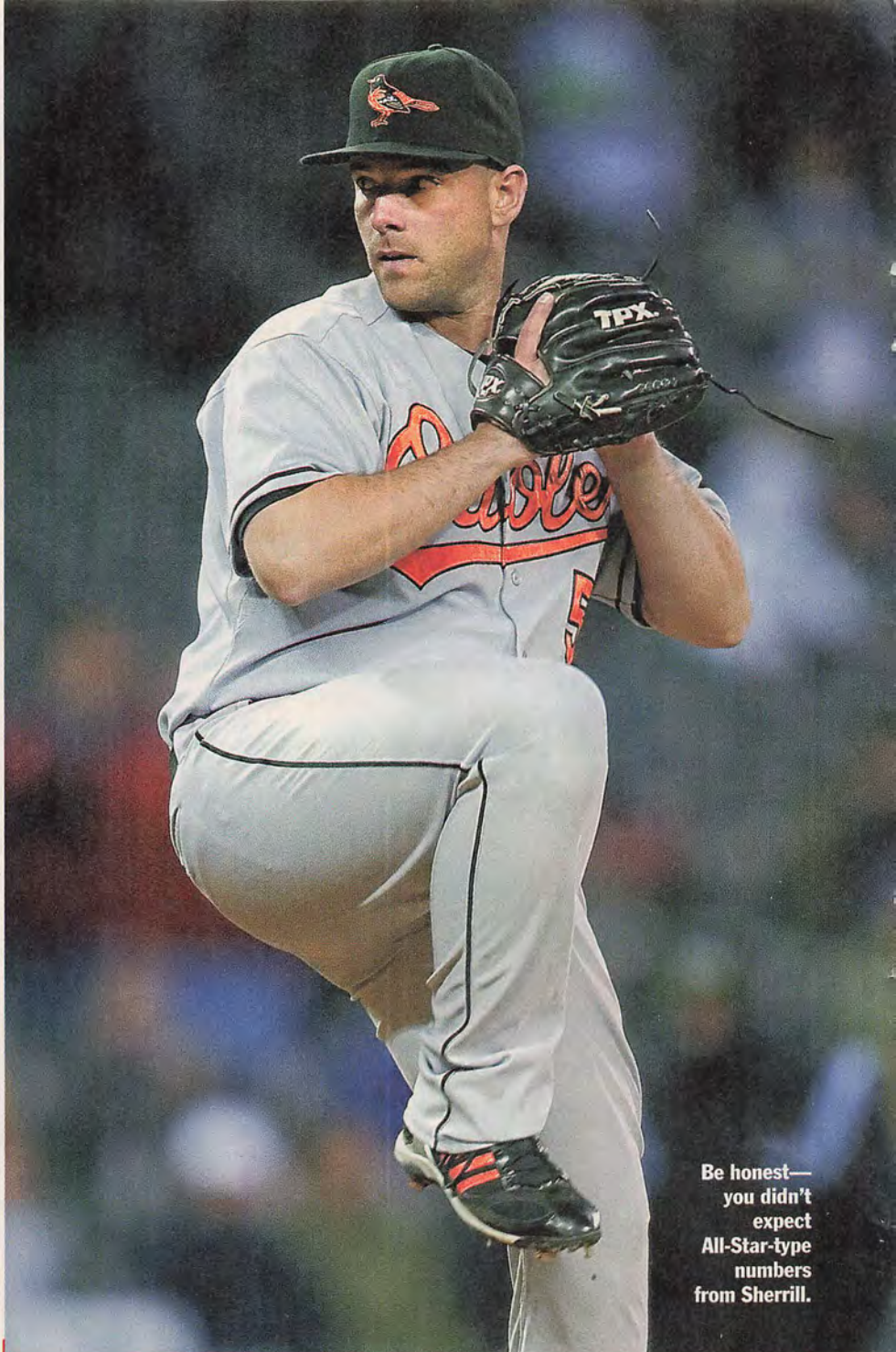
Jones' success is impressive considering only eight switch hitters have won batting titles and the highest single-season average for a switch hitter is Mickey Mantle's .365 in 1957. With two swings to keep in rhythm, switch hitters historically have struggled to stay hot for extended periods.

And through Atlanta's first 72 games this season, Jones already had faced 112 different pitchers. "When you only see a guy once, it's really difficult," Rangers hitting coach Rudy Jaramillo says. "The pitcher pitches his game. The hitter isn't sure what to look for."

>>> WHO are these guys?

The All-Star team you won't see in New York, despite production that commands attention:

C	Ryan Doumit, Pirates
1B	Casey Kotchman, Angels
2B	Edgar Gonzalez, Padres
3B	Jorge Cantu, Marlins
SS	Yunel Escobar, Braves
OF	Marcus Thames, Tigers
OF	David DeJesus, Royals
OF	Xavier Nady, Pirates
DH	Aubrey Huff, Orioles
SP	Kyle Kendrick, Phillies
RP	Jon Rauch, Nationals



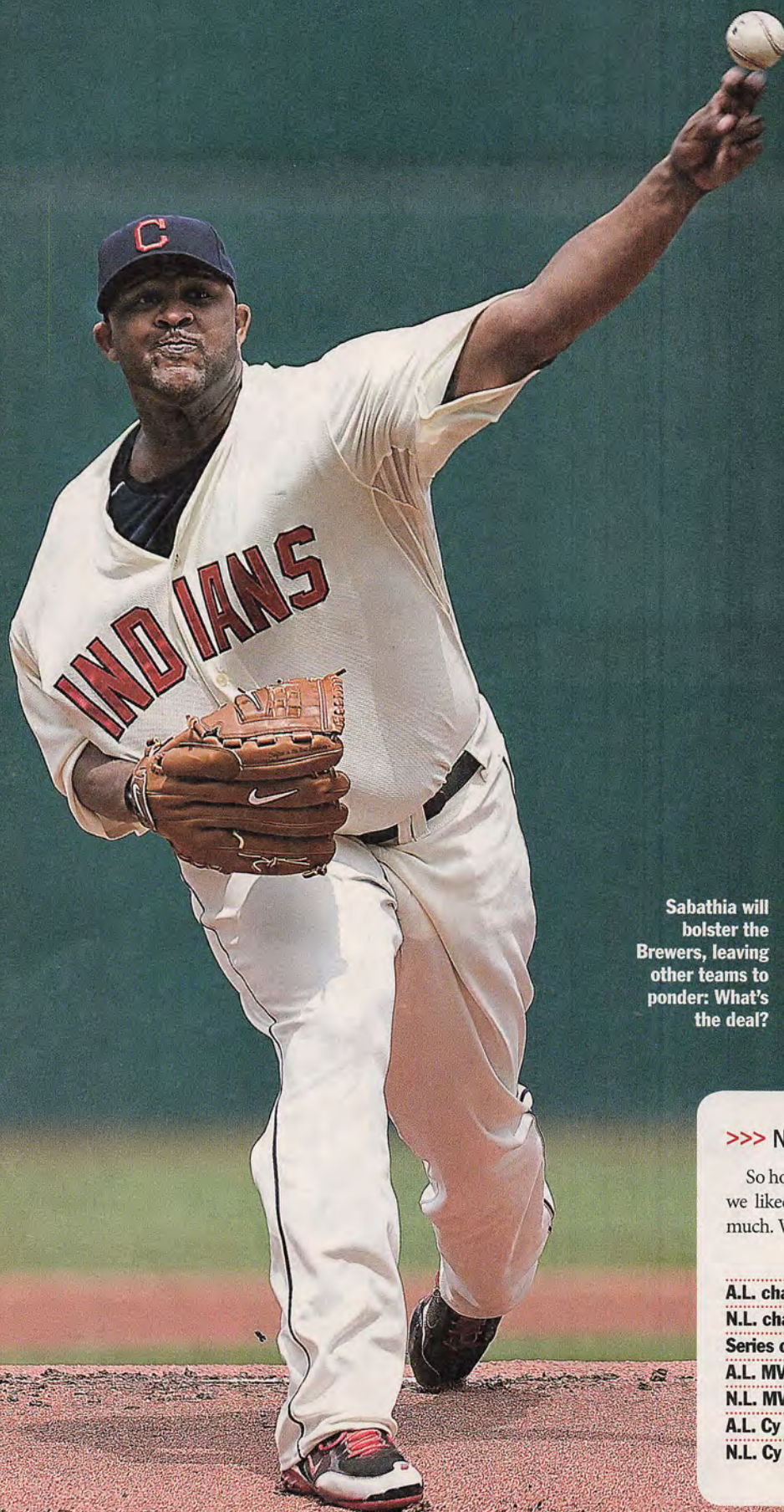
Be honest—you didn't expect All-Star-type numbers from Sherrill.

>>> CLOSING thoughts

If the Angels continue their winning ways in the A.L. West, look for closer Francisco Rodriguez to challenge Bobby Thigpen's 1990 major league record of 57 saves. Rodriguez (34 saves) is hardly a first half surprise, nor is Boston's Jonathan Papelbon (24), Minnesota's Joe Nathan (24) or the Yankees' Mariano Rivera (23).

But then there's George Sherrill, who ranks second in the majors with 27 saves. Sherrill was acquired by the Orioles in a preseason trade that sent star lefthander Erik Bedard to Seattle. And Troy Percival, whose last save before this season had been recorded in July 2005, has resurfaced to chalk up 19 saves for the surprising Rays.

Other closers who have risen from obscurity: Kerry Wood replaced Ryan Dempster and has been terrific for the Cubs with 22 saves and a 0.96 WHIP. Brad Lidge has emerged from two years of misery in Houston to post 19 saves and a 0.77 ERA for the Phillies.



Sabathia will bolster the Brewers, leaving other teams to ponder: What's the deal?

>>> Let's make a **DEAL**

Though prized starting pitcher C.C. Sabathia is off the market, dealt by the Indians to the Brewers (*brats and MGDs all around, bartender!*), there still are names being whispered today that will be shouted between now and the trading deadline.

Rich Harden, RHP, A's. He finally appears healthy, and the A's likely will trade him.

Gil Meche, RHP, Royals. The Royals will entertain bids for the veteran, who seems like a bargain now at \$11 million a year.

Erik Bedard, LHP, Mariners. The Mariners will shop him to anyone who will listen. But there might not be much interest for a pitcher who's soft and high-maintenance.

Milton Bradley, OF, Rangers. The Rangers will shop him, but they won't let him go for nothing. Bradley's fate could be tied to the fate of manager Ron Washington, who is his biggest supporter.

Braden Loooper, RHP, Cardinals. The Cardinals will listen to offers for him, but their willingness to deal will depend on the performance of several injured and iffy pitchers on their roster. They won't pay Loooper what he'll get on the open market this winter, so moving him makes some sense.

Ben Sheets, RHP, Brewers. He'll become available only if the team drops out of the Central race. That seems unlikely with Sabathia on board.

Vicente Padilla and Kevin Millwood, RHPs, Rangers. There will be few takers for these expensive pitchers unless the Rangers eat some of their contracts.

Brian Roberts, 2B, Orioles. The Cubs are still hoping to acquire Baltimore's second baseman, but they're reluctant to include righthander Jason Marquis in a deal.

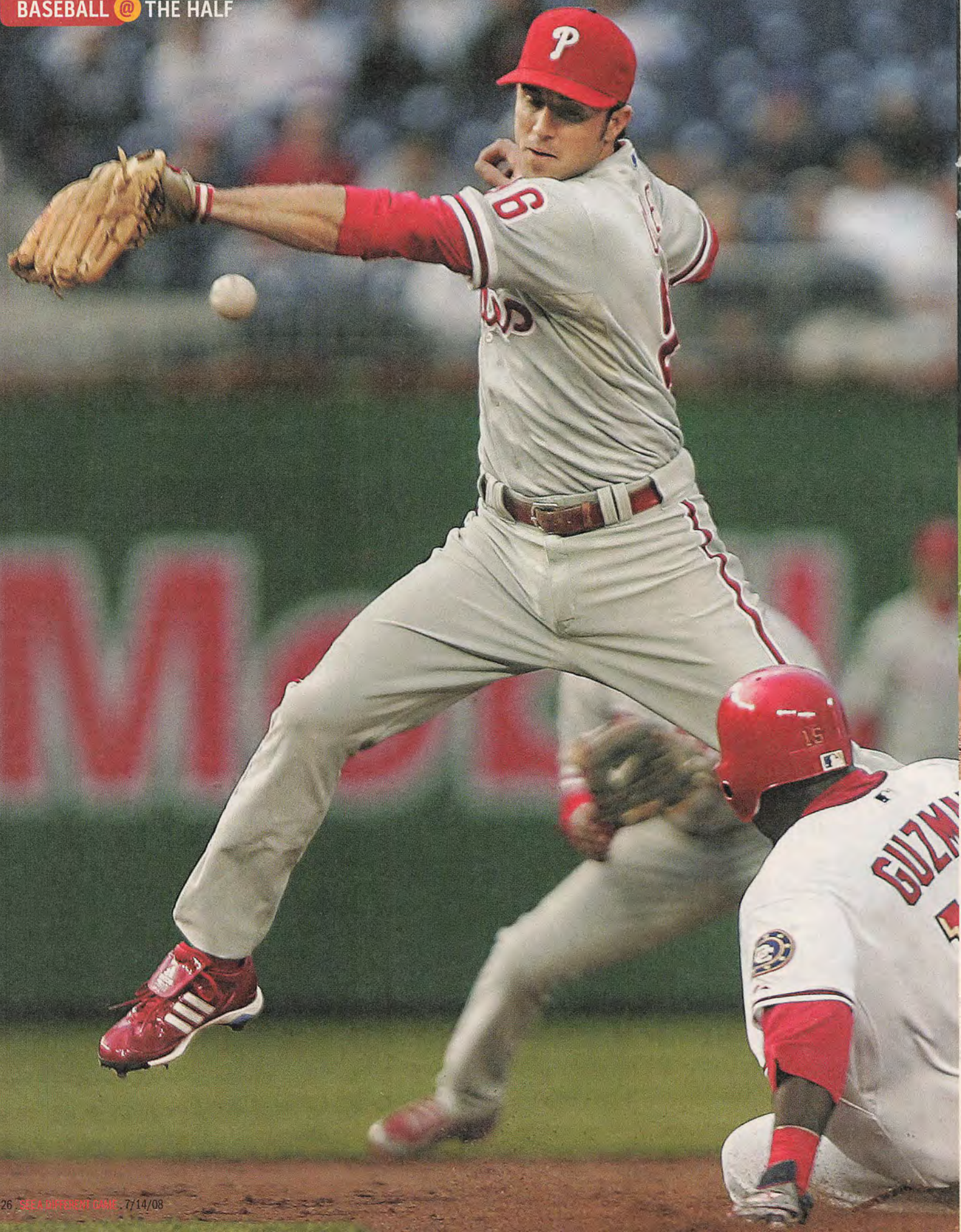
Adam Dunn, OF, Reds. The Reds will offer their power-hitting outfielder ... again. And this time an A.L. team in need of pop will bite.


Jon Garland, RHP, Angels. The Angels will listen to offers but only if Kelvim Escobar is healthy. They should find out after the All-Star break.

>>> Nobody's **PERFECT**

So how are those preseason predictions looking? Well, in March we liked a Red Sox-Diamondbacks World Series. Now, not so much. What we said then ... and what we're saying now:

	Preseason	Midseason
A.L. champ	Red Sox	Angels
N.L. champ	Diamondbacks	Cubs
Series champ	Red Sox	Angels
A.L. MVP	Grady Sizemore	Josh Hamilton
N.L. MVP	Matt Holliday	Chase Utley
A.L. Cy Young	Felix Hernandez	Francisco Rodriguez
N.L. Cy Young	Dan Haren	Tim Lincecum





The survey says ...

When it comes to ranking their peers, major league players can field the tough questions ... and their answers might surprise you *By Ryan Fagan*

In moments of candor, players will share their opinions on the guys across the diamond.

Listen to Pirates shortstop Jack Wilson talk about Diamondbacks righthander Brandon Webb: "He throws that sinker, and it's totally unfair. It comes in looking like a hittable pitch, and then it drops right down and you miss it. You know it's going to drop, but you can't help but swing at it because it looks so good. Then, if you do make contact, it's a heavy pitch and it's just like hitting a bowling ball. You're not going to drive it."

Players aren't always so candid, or verbose, with their feelings about opposing players. But they're willing to share their opinions under the veil of anonymity, which is what 473 of them (261 voters in the N.L., 212 in the A.L.) were provided in return for their answers in a survey conducted by The Sports Xchange. Then we turned to big league scouts to give us the lowdown on the top guys.

Utley's peers named him the best player in the National League, which makes sense. But he was also tabbed as the dirtiest, which doesn't.

Don't bring any 'hitters ballpark' baloney to this fight. Hamilton is the best player in the American League and would be no matter where he played.

The top five finishers in each category (ties included), with their percentage of the vote:

Best player, A.L.

Josh Hamilton	Rangers	39
Alex Rodriguez	Yankees	36
Manny Ramirez	Red Sox	5
Vladimir Guerrero	Angels	3
Grady Sizemore	Indians	2
Ichiro Suzuki	Mariners	2

Scout's take on Hamilton: "Right now, Hamilton is the best player in the league. He can do everything. He has tremendous bat speed, and he can absolutely fly. He's got above-average power; it wouldn't matter if he was playing in Texas or any other place. The ball just jumps off his bat."

Best player, N.L.

Chase Utley	Phillies	37
Albert Pujols	Cardinals	23
Lance Berkman	Astros	13
Chipper Jones	Braves	10
Hanley Ramirez	Marlins	6

Scout's take on Utley: "He's a tremendous competitor. He has kind of an unusual swing, but he's got very good power. He runs every ball out, and he's a leader by example on the field. He's not the most polished second baseman in the league, but he's athletic and he makes adjustments."



What makes Halladay so tough? Try a great fastball, great curve and impressive ability to go deep in games.

Best pitcher, A.L.

Roy Halladay	Blue Jays	28
C.C. Sabathia*	Indians	13
Cliff Lee	Indians	13
Josh Beckett	Red Sox	11
Mariano Rivera	Yankees	5

*Now with the Brewers.

Scout's take on Halladay: "It's his control. His ability to go deep into games. Above-average fastball. Above-average curveball. Ability to use both sides of the plate and command both pitches."

Best pitcher, N.L.

Brandon Webb	Diamondbacks	36
Edinson Volquez	Reds	19
Jake Peavy	Padres	12
Ben Sheets	Brewers	8
Johan Santana	Mets	8

Scout's take on Webb: "It's his sinker and his changeup. He has an exceptional sinker, and he can pitch with that one pitch, but he's really developed a very good changeup."



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Best manager, A.L.

Mike Scioscia	Angels	31
Terry Francona	Red Sox	16
Joe Maddon	Rays	13
Jim Leyland	Tigers	12
Ron Gardenhire	Twins	4

Scout's take on Scioscia: "I'll tell you who the best manager in the American League is before you tell me who won—Mike Scioscia. He uses his 25-man roster. He keeps his players fresh. He makes solid decisions. He supports his players, and he runs his pitching staff well. I don't think there's much else to be said."

Best manager, N.L.

Bobby Cox	Braves	36
Tony La Russa	Cardinals	18
Lou Piniella	Cubs	18
Fredi Gonzalez	Marlins	5
Joe Torre	Dodgers	5

Scout's take on Cox: "He's not flashy. He just day in and day out makes great decisions. He handles his bullpen well, and like Mike Scioscia, he uses his roster well. The testament to Bobby is that he has been there so long."

Toughest hitter with two outs, A.L.

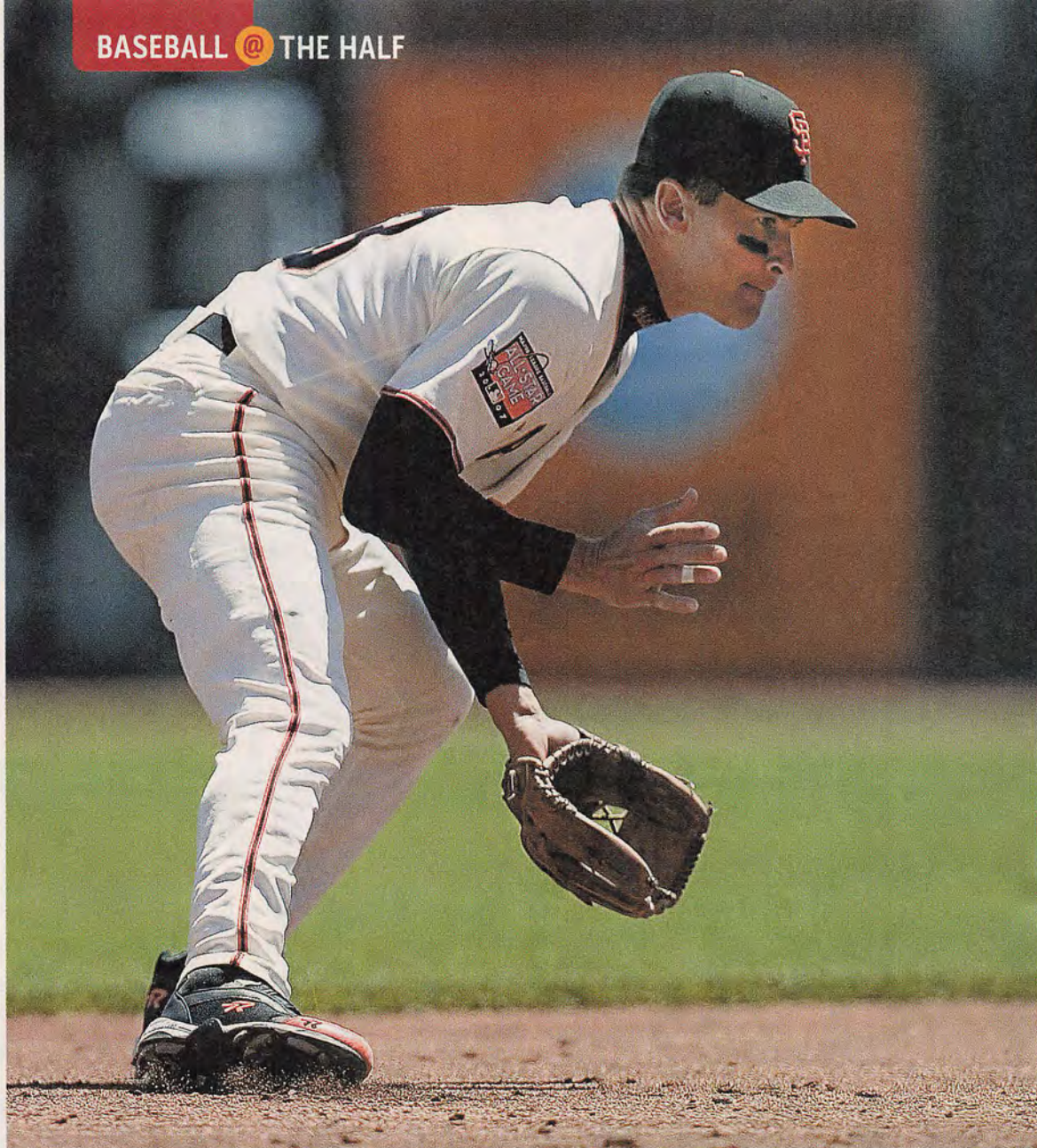
Manny Ramirez	Red Sox	26
Placido Polanco	Tigers	11
Derek Jeter	Yankees	9
Ichiro Suzuki	Mariners	8
Michael Young	Rangers	6

Scout's take on Ramirez: "Manny fouls off everyone's best pitches, and he hits the best pitchers' best pitches."

Toughest hitter with two outs, N.L.

Albert Pujols	Cardinals	28
Chase Utley	Phillies	17
Chipper Jones	Braves	15
Lance Berkman	Astros	13
Aramis Ramirez	Cubs	3

Scout's take on Pujols: "He keeps his at-bats alive. He's got very good plate coverage, and he just seems to rise to the occasion. Because he's a good breaking ball hitter, he uses the whole field."



Toughest pitcher with two outs, A.L.

Mariano Rivera	Yankees	29
Roy Halladay	Blue Jays	16
C.C. Sabathia*	Indians	7
Josh Beckett	Red Sox	7
Jonathan Papelbon	Red Sox	7

*Now with the Brewers.

Scout's take on Rivera: "Obviously, he has the cut fastball and the ability to locate it to both sides of the plate. He's consistent from the first out to the last out. He's really effective jamming lefthanded hitters with his cut fastball, and he throws so easy, he's very deceptive."

Toughest pitcher with two outs, N.L.

Brad Lidge	Phillies	13
Brandon Webb	Diamondbacks	11
Jake Peavy	Padres	9
Johan Santana	Mets	7
Billy Wagner	Mets	7

Scout's take on Lidge: "Lidge is having a great year. He puts you away quick. Surprised? Yes. People thought he was soft because of Pujols' home run in the (2005) playoffs. I didn't think that. His stuff just wasn't as sharp. Whether there was a mental component to that, I don't know. His stuff now is back as good as it has ever been, and pitching in Philly is tough. The fans let you know when you're not good."

Best defensive infielder, A.L.

Orlando Cabrera	White Sox	16
Yuniesky Betancourt	Mariners	16
John McDonald	Blue Jays	10
Placido Polanco	Tigers	8
Adrian Beltre	Mariners	6

Scout's take: "When I think of gloves, I think of shortstops. Cabrera is good, but I like John McDonald, too."

If you listen closely, you can hear the ball sizzle when Ichiro rifles it into the infield.

Best outfield arm, A.L.

Ichiro Suzuki	Mariners	37
Vladimir Guerrero	Angels	19
Jose Guillen	Royals	19
B.J. Upton	Rays	3
Josh Hamilton	Rangers	3

Scout's take on Suzuki: "He can throw from just about any position in the outfield, going left or going right or charging the ball. The ball has exceptional carry, and he's very accurate."

Best outfield arm, N.L.

Jeff Francoeur	Braves	37
Shane Victorino	Phillies	16
Rick Ankiel	Cardinals	15
Brad Hawpe	Rockies	6
Elijah Dukes	Nationals	4

Scout's take on Francoeur: "He has great life off the ground; when he throws the ball, it really takes off for him. Victorino is accurate but doesn't have quite the strength of Francoeur (whose hitting slump has resulted in what is expected to be a brief tuneup session in the minors)."

Most underrated player, A.L.

Michael Young	Rangers	8
Raul Ibanez	Mariners	8
Chone Figgins	Angels	7
Grady Sizemore	Indians	6
Placido Polanco	Tigers	4

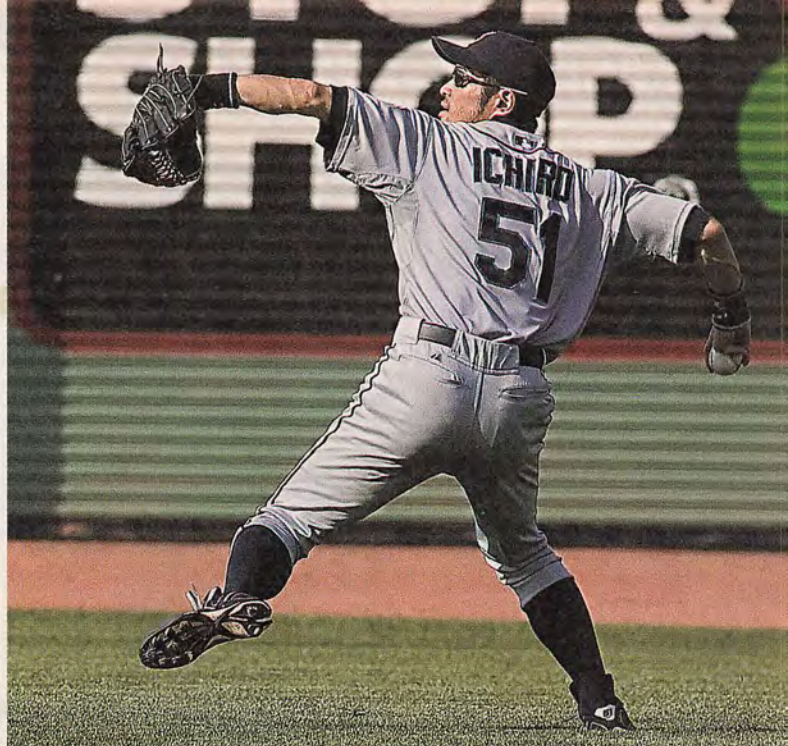
Scout's take: "When I started scouting in Arizona for spring training after being based in Florida, there were two players I wanted to see, Ichiro and Young, because I heard such great things about them. That's right on with Ibanez, too. Nobody knows him because he's in Seattle, but he goes out and does it every day."

It's a safe bet Vizquel made this play.

Best defensive infielder, N.L.

Omar Vizquel	Giants	28
Jimmy Rollins	Phillies	12
Jose Reyes	Mets	9
David Wright	Mets	7
Hanley Ramirez	Marlins	6

Scout's take on Vizquel: "He's an acrobat as far as his footwork goes. He's got great hands, but he's got great hands because of his footwork."



Most underrated player, N.L.

Dan Uggla	Marlins	13
Adrian Gonzalez	Padres	10
Hanley Ramirez	Marlins	9
Chase Utley	Phillies	4
Russell Martin	Dodgers	4

Scout's take on Uggla: "He plays hard, very workmanlike—not great at second base. There are 29 clubs that would take him in a heartbeat. Nice short stroke. You could see that swing playing in the major leagues. Finding guys like that (in the Rule 5 draft) is what the Marlins are about."

Dirtiest player, A.L.

A.J. Pierzynski	White Sox	13
Coco Crisp	Red Sox	12
Alex Rodriguez	Yankees	9
Vicente Padilla	Rangers	8
Jonny Gomes	Rays	6

Scout's take on Pierzynski: "A.J. makes everybody mad at him, but he always seems to play on winners. You hate him when you play against him and sort of like him when he's on your team. I'll take him."

Dirtiest player, N.L.

Chase Utley	Phillies	8
Pedro Martinez	Mets	5
Prince Fielder	Brewers	4
Ty Wigginton	Astros	4
Michael Barrett	Padres	3
Jeff Kent	Dodgers	3
Albert Pujols	Cardinals	3

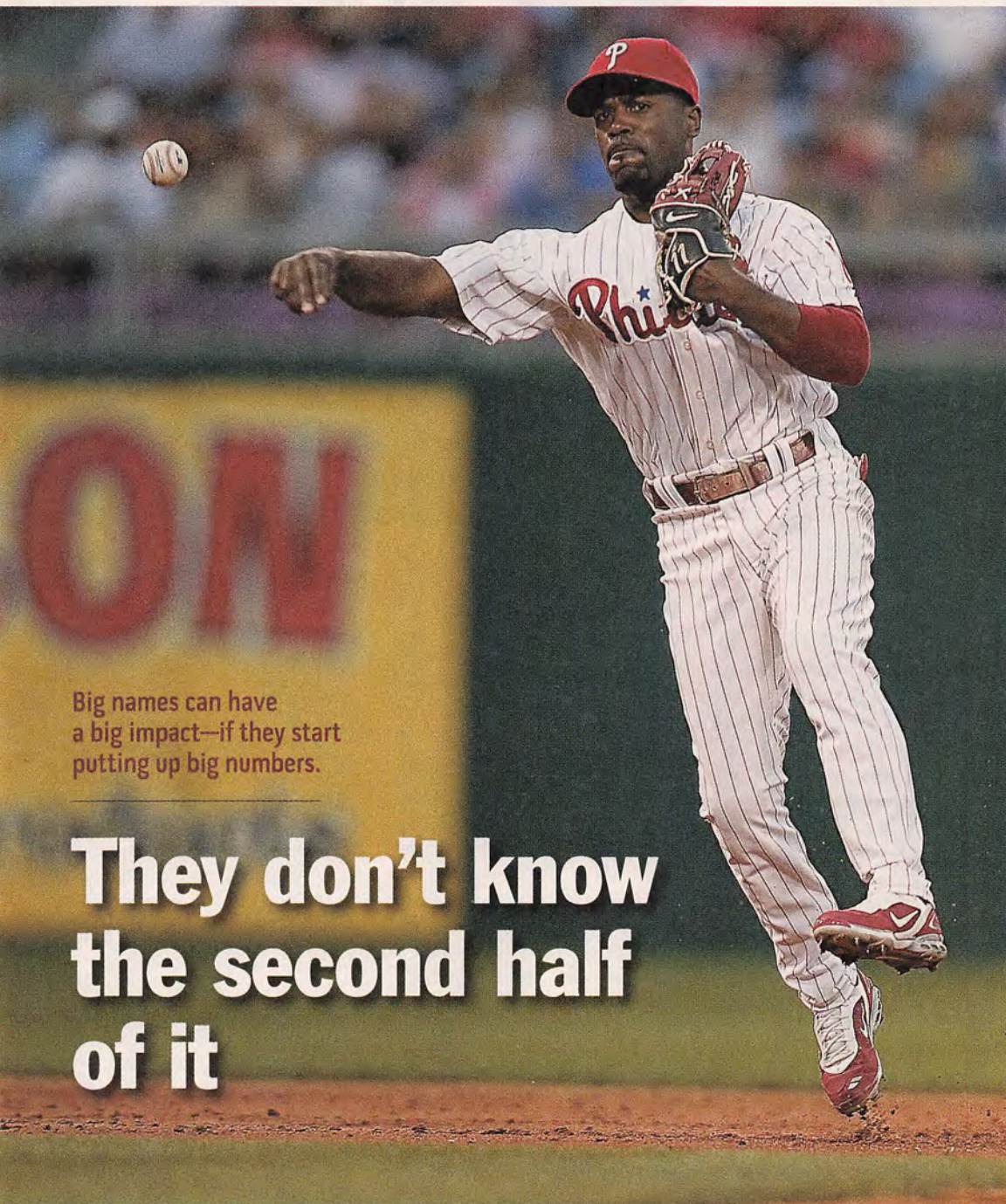
Scout's take on Utley: "If you mean dirty like he wants to kick your butt every second he's on the field, I can understand that. Dirty the way the other guy (Pierzynski) is, I just don't see it."

Best balls-and-strikes umpire

Tim McClelland	22
Jim Joyce	7
Ed Rapuano	4
Ted Barrett	4
Jim Wolf	3
Tim Welke	3

Scout's take: "That's a good question because I don't think the ball-and-strike umpiring is very good. It's too inconsistent. Players want to know what the strike zone is and they adjust. But too often a pitch is a strike one time but the same pitch is a ball the next. I'm not a Tim McClelland fan. I've seen him stick it to guys, and he makes it personal. I like Jim Joyce, along with Rapuano and Welke."

SN



Big names can have a big impact—if they start putting up big numbers.

They don't know the second half of it

Rollins typically improves by leaps and bounds in the second half. The Phillies are counting on that this year.

By Ryan Fagan

rfagan@sportingnews.com

October is when legends are made, but August and September are when playoff berths are won. A monster individual second half performance can be the catalyst a team needs to rally for a shot at the postseason.

For example ...

In 2006, Robinson Cano hit .365 with 11 hom-

ers and 51 RBIs in the second half as the Yankees went from three games behind the Red Sox at the All-Star break to win the division by 10 games.

In 2004, Johan Santana went 13-0 with a 1.21 ERA and 0.75 WHIP in the second half for the Twins, who went from a half-game behind the White Sox at the break to a double-digit division lead by mid-September.

But in some cases, a monster performance isn't necessary. Sometimes, just a return to typical production levels from a star player or two can be

Reynolds, Diamondbacks.

LF Delmon Young, Twins. Young's batting average has been solid (.289), but he didn't hit his first home run until June 7, in his 233rd at-bat. The Twins know Young, 22, hasn't yet reached his power potential, but they need more production from him. Honorable mention: Chris Duncan, Cardinals.

CF Nick Swisher, White Sox. Swisher has been versatile in the field, filling in at first base while Konerko has been out, but he was batting just .201

enough to lead a team into the postseason.

The "had-better-be-better" stars of 2008's second half:

C Jason Varitek, Red Sox. He's still a defensive stalwart and clubhouse leader, but Varitek is having a rough go at the plate, hitting a career-low .219 with 27 RBIs and a .360 slugging percentage. Honorable mention: Kurt Suzuki, A's.

1B Paul Konerko, White Sox. Konerko was struggling (.215 average, eight homers) even before landing on the disabled list in mid-June with an oblique injury. With the Twins and Tigers making a strong push in the A.L. Central, the Sox need Konerko at his home run hitting best. Honorable mention: Carlos Delgado, Mets.

2B Robinson Cano, Yankees. Cano had a career .314 batting average heading into the season, but entered the week hitting just .249. His runs and RBIs are way down, too. There are signs of hope, though—he's batting .368 with 15 RBIs since June 14. Honorable mention: Rickie Weeks, Brewers.

SS Jimmy Rollins, Phillies. Rollins has been little more than average in the first half—.267 average, six homers, 37 runs scored. The reigning N.L. MVP, though, has been a better second half player throughout his career, and the Phillies need Rollins' best—he's hitting .305 in Phillies victories and just .222 in their losses. Honorable mention: Julio Lugo, Red Sox.

3B Bill Hall, Brewers. The Hall-in-center field experiment of 2007 didn't work, but moving him back into the infield hasn't helped so far this season. Hall is showing little patience at the plate (19 walks) and is batting .220 with a measly .690 OPS. Honorable mention: Mark

entering June. He has found his stride lately, hitting .300 with eight homers and 25 RBIs since June 1. Honorable mention: Andruw Jones, Dodgers.

RF Jeremy Hermida, Marlins. As odd as it sounds, the Marlins need Hermida to provide protection for their leadoff hitter, Hanley Ramirez. Hermida, the No. 2 hitter, has been OK this season, but that .264 batting average isn't going to deter pitchers from working around Ramirez. Honorable mention: Justin Upton, Diamondbacks.

DH Gary Sheffield, Tigers. When Sheffield drives in at least one run, the Tigers are 9-5. The fact that he has driven in runs in only 14 of his 51 games tells how much Sheffield has struggled. Honorable mention: Gary Matthews, Angels.

RH starter Jason Marquis, Cubs. The rotation isn't exactly a glaring weakness for the N.L.'s best team, but it's not necessarily a strength, either. Marquis has been up and down from start to start, and his 4.78 ERA is the highest of any Cub with at least 30 innings pitched. Honorable mention: Joe Blanton, A's.

LH starter. Randy Johnson, Diamondbacks. Johnson has been either very good (six starts with two or fewer earned runs) or very bad (four starts with six or more earned runs). Opponents are batting .250 against him in the first two innings but .316 the rest of the game. Honorable mention: Oliver Perez, Mets.

Closer Todd Jones, Tigers. The crater-sized hole the Tigers dug in the first two months of the season brought their margin of error down to zero. Jones has been effective—only one blown save—but his 5.23 ERA isn't pretty. Honorable mention: Kevin Gregg, Marlins. **SN**

BLOG ALERT

No voting necessary, we're sending our all-star team to the All-Star Game. Our reporters and bloggers will get all the biggest trade rumors and latest gossip from the baseball fest at Yankee Stadium. It's all at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Last Friday, Nomar Garciaparra was playing shortstop in one game and the Rockies won another, 18-17. What is this, 1999?

Best record in baseball, only two players in the All-Star Game. Guess the Rays have a few more people to convince.

Who would have thought the White Sox-Athletics series over the Fourth of July weekend would have meant more to the playoff race than Red Sox-Yankees?

RHP **Kyle Lohse** has found success with the Cardinals and pitching coach **Dave Duncan** this season because of his ability to locate his sinker and fastball at the knees on either edge of the strike zone. By focusing on keeping the ball down, Lohse—who has allowed at

least 22 homers in five seasons—has been able to keep the ball in the park (only eight homers allowed entering the week) and stay away from big innings. "You've got to fight yourself sometimes when you get in situations where you might want to try to do too much," he says. "That's when you overthrow, and the ball comes out flat and gets up in the zone. I've been able to

INSIDE DISH

dropped his batting average to .234. "He swings too hard," one N.L. scout says. "He swings hard, and he swings through a lot of pitches and pulls his head out, it seems to me. You can't hit with two strikes the way you hit with no strikes. You need to learn to cut that down a little bit." The Braves expressed regret that they had to make such a drastic move but promised Francoeur he

would be back in the majors within 20 days of his demotion. At Mississippi, he'll work with manager **Phillip Wellman**, who was his hitting coach when Francoeur first came through Class AA in 2005. **> David Eckstein's** name has been thrown around in trade rumors, and it makes sense that the Blue Jays would move their starting shortstop with the team in last place in the A.L. East. They have capable replacements in **Marco Scutaro** and **John McDonald**. "It made no sense for Toronto to sign David Eckstein when they had McDonald," an A.L. scout says. "He's the best defensive shortstop in the league." **> Talked** with a scout last week about RHP **Brad Lidge**, and he said the Phillies were confident they were trading for the lights-out Lidge of 2004-05, not the inconsistent Lidge of the past two seasons. Lidge has been dominating hitters so far this season—0.77 ERA and perfect 19-of-19 in save opportunities—and the Phillies rewarded him with a three-year, \$37.5 million contract extension on Sunday.



When Lohse keeps the ball down, his ERA goes down with it.

THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

Some props for the first half, predictions for the second

Props to the Rays, who went 20 games over .500 after sweeping the Red Sox last week. Andrew Friedman and his staff deserve a ton of credit. They have great young talent in B.J. Upton, Evan Longoria, Scott Kazmir and James Shields. They have solid veterans in Carlos Pena, Carl Crawford, Troy Percival, Dan Wheeler and the team bouncer, Jonny Gomes.

them three MVPs in as many years. The Marlins again are right there and should make the N.L. East tight until the finish.

It's tempting to look at the N.L. West and think *Who cares?* Then you remember the last N.L. champions (the Rockies) came from that division and the Diamondbacks have all that good young talent and great starting pitchers.

And with inter-league play wrapped up, it's time to call it like it is: The A.L. is the better league—again. That's not to say the N.L. is weak, but for every N.L. superstar there are two in the A.L. The N.L. does not have a pinch hitter as productive as a top-shelf DH.

Not that it would make a big difference, but I wish league officials would switch the rules so the DH is used in N.L. cities and not used in A.L. parks. Wouldn't it be cool for N.L. fans to see how dramatically the DH changes the strategy? And those Cro-Magnon A.L. fans could learn a lesson or two about pure baseball while getting to see their favorite pitcher hit. Please, Mr.

Selig, look into it.

With the All-Star Game coming up in New York, news comes that A-Rod won't be participating in the home run derby. You have to wonder why he would skip it in his home ballpark. Does he think Mark McGwire wanted to participate when he was hitting all those home runs in the late '90s? Sure, stars like A-Rod would prefer to rest, but the presence of a Yankees star in the derby at Yankee Stadium is something kids could use for inspiration.

A second half prediction: The team that wins it all in October will have been close to dead in the water at least twice in the months leading up. It seems like that happens every year. That's one of the things that make this game so great.



With Upton and the young guys on the upswing, the Rays aren't going away.

They no longer are the punching bag of the A.L. East. They have arrived.

Hats off also to the Cubs. This club has a chance to captivate the country if it gets to the World Series. Ask anybody from the 2004 Red Sox. If you are fortunate enough to play for a club that pulls off something like the Sox did, your life can get a whole lot easier.

Then there's the Angels. They have one of the best clubs in the A.L. They pitch and play defense. Their lineup can be pitched to, but it still can be deadly. I say it can be pitched to only because my Tigers are finished with the Angels for the regular season.

How about the Phillies? Chase Utley could follow the lead of Ryan Howard and Jimmy Rollins to give

The week ahead

July 11-13

A pitchers' duel

Pitching will be the name of the game—as always—when the Angels play the A's in Oakland. The A's posted an A.L.-best 3.24 ERA in June, a tick ahead of the Angels at 3.29. Righthander Justin Duchschere, who is 6-0 with a 1.28 career ERA against the Angels, is in line to pitch the series finale.

July 11-13

Home sweet Wrigley

The Cubs get another chance to pad their outstanding home record with a series against the Giants. The Cubs are scheduled to play 10 of their first 14 post-break games on the road, where they have a sub-.500 record. One of the reasons: Outfielder Kosuke Fukudome is hitting .209 with a .294 slugging percentage away from Wrigley, .373 with a .563 slugging percentage at home.

July 13

Looking forward to Webb?

Diamondbacks manager Bob Melvin will be tempted to squeeze one more start out of ace Brandon Webb by using him in the last game before the All-Star break. That would be fine with Phillies shortstop Jimmy Rollins, who is hitting .417 with a .583 slugging percentage in 24 career at-bats against Webb.

July 15

Star power, the American way

Look for the American League to flex its muscle again in the All-Star Game at Yankee Stadium. Over the past 11 years, the A.L. is 10-0-1 and has hit 20 homers while posting a .501 slugging percentage. The National League has been a comparative lightweight, hitting nine homers with a .361 slugging percentage. —Gerry Fraley

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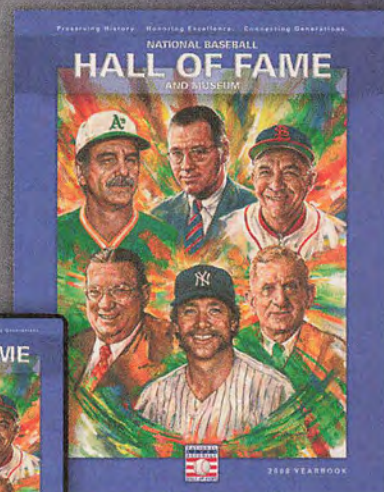
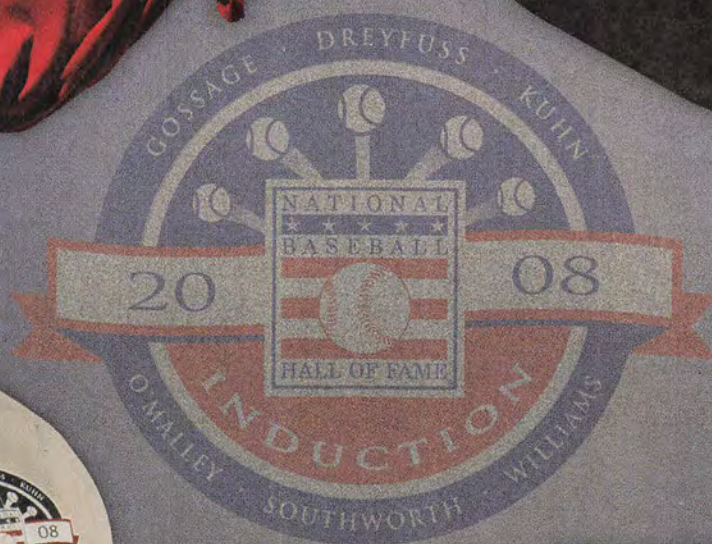


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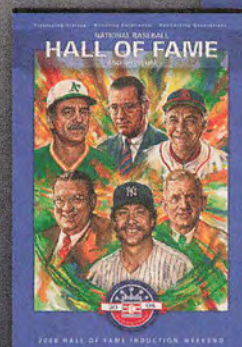
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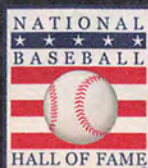


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After a deadly tornado ripped through Parkersburg, Iowa, Brad Meester went to work.

Helping a hometown in need

By Clifton Brown

cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com

When his quarterback calls the signals, Brad Meester snaps the football. When his hometown is struck by tragedy, Meester snaps into action.

The Jaguars' starting center has spent the past several weeks spearheading fundraising efforts for his hometown of Parkersburg, Iowa, which was devastated by an unusually severe tornado May 25. National Weather Service officials estimated the tornado was a mile wide, traveled 43 miles and stayed on the ground for close to an hour.

It destroyed about one-third of Parkersburg, a town of about 1,900 people. Six residents were killed. The high school was left a crumpled mess. The family of Meester's wife, Jamie, was hit particularly hard.

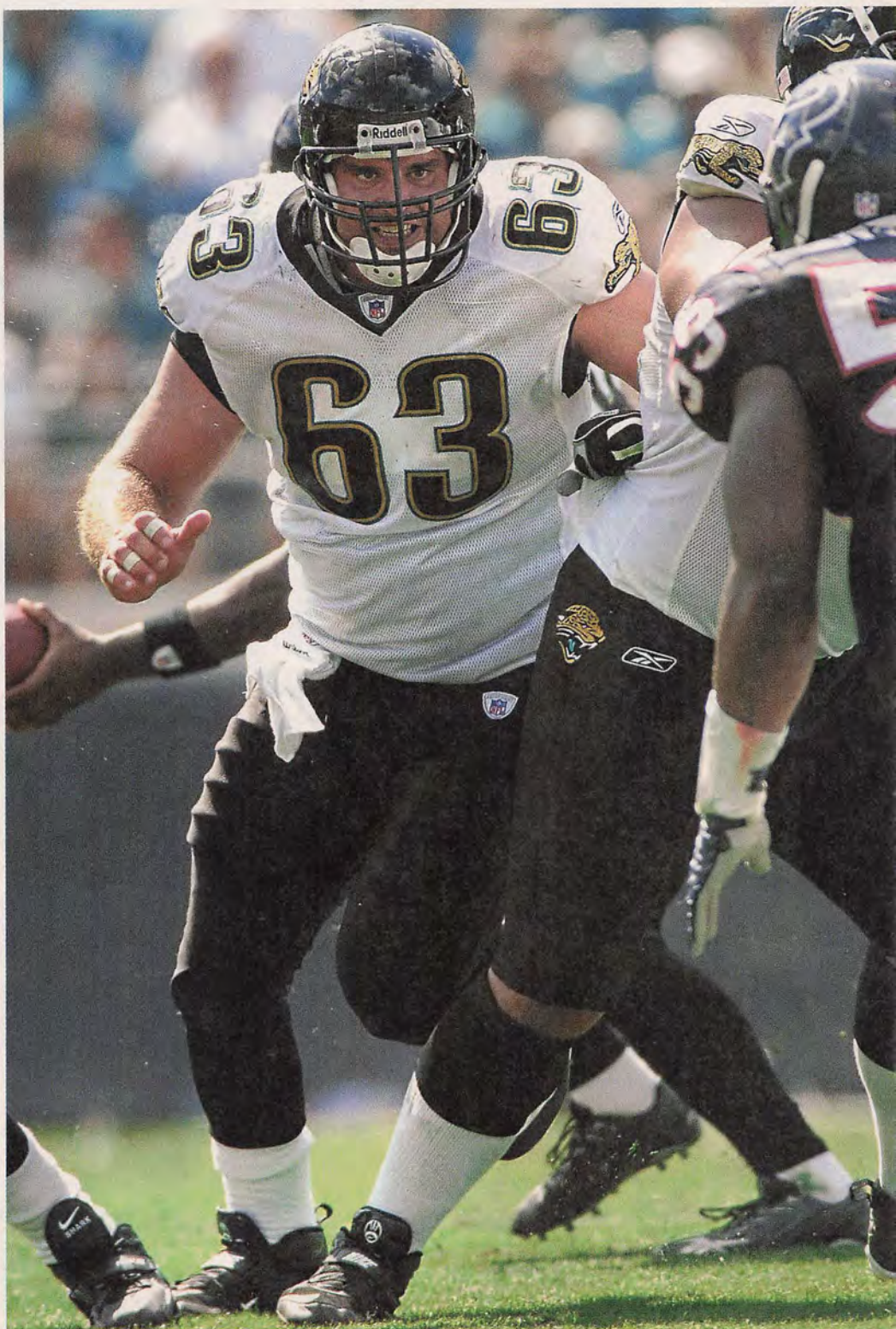
"Her parents lost their house, her grandma lost her house, her aunt and uncle lost their house," Meester says. "Fortunately, everybody was OK. But it's been tough, especially being far away and not being able to do anything."

Actually, Meester has done plenty, urging teammates and Jaguars fans to offer their help. During minicamp, Jaguars players and coaches wore hats that said "AP Falcons," standing for Aplington-Parkersburg, the name of Meester's high school. The hats sold for \$20 and became a popular item in Jacksonville, with proceeds going to the town's tornado relief fund. Teammates made donations. Jaguars owner Wayne Weaver presented Meester with a check for \$32,000. So far, Meester has helped the Jaguars raise more than \$90,000, and he is spending the remainder of his offseason in Parkersburg to help rebuild and raise funds.

In eight seasons with the Jaguars, Meester has been a fixture on the offensive line with 119 starts (including the first 92 in a row). He is a player who delivers for his teammates. Now he is delivering for his hometown.

"Brad's always been that kind of guy, a leader, a guy with quiet strength," says Ed Thomas, who has been Aplington-Parkersburg's head football coach for 33 years. "I've always told people that if all we teach kids here is football, we've failed them. We want them to become good players and good

The Jaguars have gotten behind Meester's efforts to bring relief to Parkersburg.



people. Brad is both.”

Thomas has built a proud football legacy that has become part of the town’s fabric. Four active NFL players played for Thomas at Aplington-Parkersburg—Meester, Lions defensive end Jared DeVries, Packers defensive end Aaron Kampman and Broncos center Casey Wiegmann. What are the odds of a town of 1,900 producing four current NFL players? You’d get better odds on the Dolphins going undefeated this season.

The tornado that rolled through the center of town crushed Thomas’ school and football field. The coach is lucky to be alive after huddling with his wife in the basement while the storm blew away their home.

“I beat the storm home by about five minutes,” Thomas says. “It sounded just like they say, like a locomotive. But what I remember most is the sound of wood breaking. As we were coming up the steps,

my wife said to me, ‘You know our home is gone.’”

The few hours after the tornado were particularly harrowing for Meester, who was in Jacksonville worrying about the fate of family and friends. Phone lines were down, and cell phones were difficult to use because so many people were attempting to make calls.

‘Her parents lost their house, her grandma lost her house, her aunt and uncle lost their house.’

—Brad Meester, talking about his wife’s family in Parkersburg

Meester was especially worried about his 89-year-old grandmother, Lena Meester, who lives alone. Unable to reach her basement without assistance, she told her grandson that she simply sat in her chair and looked out the window in horror. The tornado came within a half-mile of her front door, but both she and her property were spared.

“Can you imagine being 89 years old, sitting there and watching that?” says Meester. “When you think about it, it’s frightening. When you get there and actually see the damage, it’s unbelievable.”

Aplington-Parkersburg High School was too damaged to be saved, and a new building will be erected in its place. But debris has been cleared from the football field, and townspeople are building new bleachers, determined to have the field ready for the Falcons’ home opener in September.

Thousands of people have donated time and money to help Parkersburg, including DeVries, Kampman and Wiegmann, all of whom have returned since the tornado to offer assistance. Meester is modest and does not like to be singled out, but he deserves to be commended. The Jaguars’ \$90,000 donation will not be forgotten in Parkersburg, thanks to a center who has taken center stage to help his hometown in need. **SN**

speedreads

The Colts may enter training camp with Dwight Freeney, Bob Sanders and Tyjuan Hagler all too injured to practice. They will not be receiving get-well cards from the Jaguars.

Ronnie Brown believes his recovery from knee surgery is ahead of schedule. No matter what Brown says, the Dolphins should keep him on the sideline during the preseason.

Packers coach Mike McCarthy was married during the offseason. Take one guess which kind of ring McCarthy wants next.

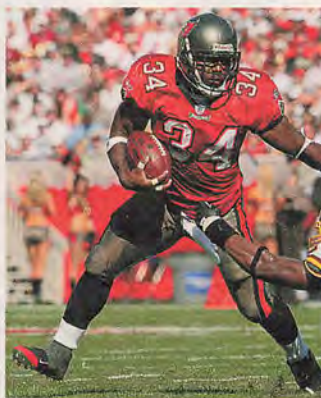
ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Who needs to sign a veteran free-agent running back? Read Clifton Brown at sportingnews.com to find out.

RB **Ernest Graham** used his leverage to secure a new four-year contract with the Buccaneers. With **Cadillac Williams’** future uncertain after major knee surgery, the Bucs could not afford to play hardball with Graham. They signed **Warrick Dunn** during the offseason, but Dunn is 33 and averaged 3.2 yards per carry last season. And **Michael Bennett** has not rushed for more than 500 yards in a season since 2002. Graham proved he is ready to be a feature back by rushing for 898 yards and 10 touchdowns last season. Giving Graham a new deal keeps him from being disgruntled, and now the Bucs have ample backfield depth if Williams can’t return. ➤ Don’t expect the players union to agree easily to a rookie salary scale. NFL commissioner **Roger Goodell** recently called the size of rookie contracts

“ridiculous,” and some veteran players also believe top draft choices are paid too much. However, it is not the union’s job to control how much the owners spend. If less money is paid to rookies, veterans will want guarantees that the extra money will be funneled to them, not to the owners. There will be much back-and-forth rhetoric on this issue as the union and players attempt to negotiate a new labor deal. ➤ **Joe Horn** wants the Falcons to trade him, but there is not high demand for a 36-year-old wide receiver coming off a 27-catch season. The Falcons did not get much bang for their buck

INSIDE DISH



Graham gives the Bucs a safety net at running back.

last season after signing Horn to a four-year, \$15 million contract. Horn wants to play for a contender, but some teams are wary of Horn’s ability to produce and stay healthy at this stage of his career. Considering Horn’s diminished trade value and the Falcons’ commitment to younger receivers, Horn may eventually be waived. ➤ The Dolphins expect **Joey Porter** to flourish as an outside linebacker in the 3-4 scheme run by new coordinator **Paul Pasqualoni**. Porter will be turned loose on the quarterback in many passing situations, the same role he had during his heyday with the Steelers. Porter’s play was one of many disappointments during the Dolphins’ dreadful 2007 season. Porter, 31, is still one of the league’s best trash talkers, but the Dolphins need him to back up his words with more consistent

production. ➤ It is not a good sign for the Browns that WR **Joe Jurevicius**, 33, required a second surgical procedure on his right knee since January. His status for training camp is uncertain, and once he gets on the field, it will be difficult for him to be as effective as he was last season, when he caught 50 passes for 614 yards. The Browns signed WR **Donte Stallworth** during the offseason, an addition that looks more important in light of Jurevicius’ health problems. The Browns may also ask return specialist **Josh Cribbs** to take more snaps at wide receiver.

For evidence that the Patriots' defense is changing, look no further than Mayo.

A quick

The Patriots are finally serving youth at linebacker, and Jerod Mayo has the fast feet—and mind—to make an immediate impact *By John Tomase*

If Jerod Mayo is mastering the NFL's most complicated defense on a rainy afternoon in the practice bubble at Gillette Stadium, Bill Belichick isn't letting on.

As Mayo runs through a series of mini-camp drills, Belichick stands behind the rookie linebacker, coolly whipping a whistle around his finger in ever tighter concentric circles. Clockwise. Counterclockwise. Clockwise. Counterclockwise.

Belichick is famous for the private instructions/challenges/one-liners he utters in such settings. They're just loud enough for the players on the field to hear—and just quiet enough to disappoint anyone trying to eavesdrop from the sideline.

Whatever Belichick is saying, Mayo appears intent on making his new coach proud. He hustles across the formation on one play, then sprints into coverage on the next, appearing fluid and quick each time.

When Mayo retreats to the sideline, he glues himself to veteran Tedy Bruschi, who gladly continues the lessons Belichick started. The games won't count for another three months, but Mayo recognizes the daunting task ahead: know the defense and his responsibilities so thoroughly that he can line up next to Bruschi at inside linebacker when the Pats open the season against the Chiefs in Foxborough.

So far, so good. He still has to beat out veteran Victor Hobson, but Mayo hasn't done anything to show he doesn't belong in the mix. At his current trajectory, he looks like a regular contributor, not that he's taking anything for granted.

"It's tough, man," he says. "It's a com-

ck learner

plicated scheme, and I think I've got a lot to learn. The older guys are really helping me out, but I'm just trying to be a sponge and learn as much as I can now. It's a whole different level than college."

The Patriots expect Mayo to be a quick learner. Their first-round pick out of Tennessee (10th overall) is a blast of youth at a position sorely needing it. New England had the league's oldest group of linebackers last year, and though the results were generally solid—Mike Vrabel made his first Pro Bowl, Adalius Thomas became more comfortable as the season progressed, and Junior Seau and Bruschi kept on keeping on—the unit wore down late in the season and in the playoffs. The clock is ticking.

Bruschi just turned 35 and is entering his 13th season. Vrabel will turn 33 next month and is in his 12th year. Thomas, a nine-year veteran, will turn 31 in August. Seau, 39, hasn't decided whether he'll return for a 19th season.

"We certainly wanted to get younger and faster on defense," Belichick says, "but I've been saying that for the last six years."

So what changed this year, when the Patriots used five of their seven draft picks—six if you count potential receiver-turned-safety Matt Slater—on defense? It starts with Mayo.

It's safe to say, since Belichick arrived in 2000, the Patriots have never drafted a player like Mayo. They hadn't selected a linebacker before the fifth round, let alone in the top 10.

But they changed their minds after extensively scouting the 6-1, 242-pounder, who became one of the fastest climbers in the draft after racking up 140 tackles as a junior. War Room scouts say Mayo "brings the explosive playmaking ability the team has lacked at linebacker for three or four years."

"He had a very good Combine workout, but he



Bruschi and his linebacker mates began to wear down in '07, and those aging legs couldn't hold up in the Super Bowl.

was the guy that everyone who scouted the SEC knew about," Belichick says. "He's smart, he understands schemes and concepts, he runs the defense, makes the calls and adjustments, all those things. He has a lot to offer."

The Patriots haven't hesitated to throw rookies into the furnace at cornerback or on the defensive line, but it would be unprecedented for a rookie linebacker to start in Belichick's system.

The Patriots liked him for his speed, an area they began addressing in the defensive backfield last year when they drafted safety Brandon Meriweather in the first round. Like Meriweather, Mayo was considered one of the fastest players at his position in the draft, running a 4.54

40-yard dash but playing even faster.

"I thought he was the best linebacker in the draft," former Redskins and Texans general manager Charley Casserly says. "I watched him and (No. 9 pick Keith) Rivers, and I liked him better than Rivers. I thought he was more physical and showed more instinct."

The question was how Mayo would fare in the middle of a 3-4 scheme that had always been stocked with veterans for a reason. The system was considered too tough mentally for a rookie to handle. The Patriots ask their linebackers to not only get to the ball but to read the linemen in front

of them and fill the proper gap instantly. Getting to the hole a split second late is the same as not getting there at all. Add in the coverage responsibilities and it's a challenging system to learn.

But Mayo considers himself a film room junkie, and linebacker Shawn Crable, a third-round pick in April, says that during late-night study sessions this spring, the rookie linebackers often called the coaching staff at midnight and beyond with questions.

"When I went up there for my (pre-draft) visit, we sat down and went over a couple of plays, adjustments, things like that," Mayo said the day he was drafted. "Then they took it off the board and had me draw the plays back up with adjustments. I feel pretty confident in my skills to learn systems and things like that, but they taught me the very basic plays."

Rookie camp, OTAs and minicamp brought a crash course in more advanced work, with the real test yet to come: training camp.

There's a legitimate chance Mayo will open the season starting on the weak side next to Bruschi. The Patriots haven't hesitated to throw rookies into the furnace at cornerback (Asante Samuel, Randall Gay) or on the defensive line (Richard Seymour, Vince Wilfork), but it would be unprecedented for a rookie linebacker to start in Belichick's system.

"Adding youth to the mix makes it extra exciting because the young guys are eager to learn and willing to listen," strong safety Rodney Harrison says. "It's a fun mix. You have to have veterans and you have to have young guys."

Mayo is up to the challenge, but he's not setting unrealistic expectations. "I just want to contribute to the team," he says. "These guys won 18 games last year without me."

A meaningful contribution from Mayo in 2008 would go a long way toward reaching lofty heights again. The Patriots are a defense in transition, and Mayo represents the first step toward their next generation.

You think Belichick was watching him closely at minicamp? Wait 'til late July. **SN**

AFC

Focus on OFFENSE

1 Colts RT Ryan Diem and LT Tony Ugoh are the book-ends on a line that gives Peyton Manning the time and space to work his magic. Pro Bowl C Jeff Saturday is a tenacious blocker and has strong rapport with Manning.

2 Chargers This unit has paved the way for the NFL's rushing leader the past two years. The left side (G Kris Dielman and T Marcus McNeill) went to the Pro Bowl after last season, and C Nick Hardwick went after '06.

3 Patriots A group led by LT Matt Light, LG Logan Mankins and C Dan Koppen is quick and versatile, able to zone-block on one play and power-block the next. The cohesiveness shows on a unit entering its fourth year together.

4 Browns Neither LT Joe Thomas nor LG Eric Steinbach is a mauler, but both are strong, smart and consistent. They form one of the best left sides in the game. The team can bank on every position except right guard.

5 Bengals The return of a healthy RT Willie Anderson bolsters a line that can blow defenders off the ball. The team used the franchise tag on Stacy Andrews, who can move back to guard after replacing Anderson last year.

6 Jets Pro Bowl LG Alan Faneca will be a mentor to LT D'Brickshaw Ferguson and C Nick Mangold, both of whom struggled at times last year. The Jets expect former G Damien Woody to be an above-average right tackle.



With Thomas knocking people around last season, the Browns' offense went from bust to busting out.

7 Bills This revamped group showed vast improvement last season. The best of the bunch is LT Jason Peters, who has excellent footwork, quickness and agility. RT Langston Walker (6-8, 366) can overpower defenders.

8 Jaguars A unit that helped the Jags lead the league in rushing over the past two years is in flux with competitions at both left-side positions. The right side is solid with T Tony Pashos and G Vince Manuwai.

9 Titans LT Michael Roos is athletic and savvy, and RT David Stewart is a mauler

with a mean streak. The Titans got more physical by adding former Colts RG Jake Scott, who can take on sturdy defensive tackles.

10 Steelers The loss of LG Alan Faneca won't help a unit that struggled last season, especially in pass protection. LT Marvel Smith must play even better, and free agent Justin Hartwig must strengthen the center spot.

11 Broncos If healthy, this could be a solid and athletic group. C Tom Nalen is coming off knee and biceps injuries, and LG Ben Hamilton (postconcussion symptoms) missed all of 2007. Rookie LT Ryan Clady will start.

12 Texans Can rookie LT Duane Brown make an impact? He and free-agent C Chris Myers appear to be good fits in new assistant Alex Gibbs' zone-blocking scheme. Eric Winston has emerged as a solid right tackle.

13 Dolphins The arrival of LT Jake Long allows Vernon Carey to shift back to the right side, where his power and size make him a better fit. C Samson Satele is an up-and-comer, but the guards have health concerns.

14 Ravens This young line will take time to develop. The strength will be inside with RG Marshal Yanda, LG Ben Grubbs and C Jason Brown. All three are athletic and can run-block. The team will have problems at tackle.

15 Raiders LG Robert Gallery, RG Cooper Carlisle and Co. are nice fits in the team's zone-blocking scheme. But the team has a big question at left tackle, where 49ers castoff Kwame Harris will try to protect QB JaMarcus Russell's blind side.

16 Chiefs This unit will be younger, and that likely means more mistakes. It needs a lift from rookie LT Branden Albert, an athletic first-rounder. LG Brian Waters and RT Damion McIntosh are solid players when healthy.

TOP 5

TACKLES

1. Joe Thomas, LT, Browns
2. Matt Light, LT, Patriots
3. Jason Peters, LT, Bills
4. Michael Roos, LT, Titans
5. Marcus McNeill, LT, Chargers

GUARDS/CENTERS

1. Jeff Saturday, C, Colts
2. Alan Faneca, LG, Jets
3. Logan Mankins, LG, Patriots
4. Eric Steinbach, LG, Browns
5. Kris Dielman, LG, Chargers

NSIVE LINES

NFC

1 Cowboys Three Pro Bowlers—LT Flozell Adams, RG Leonard Davis and C Andre Gurode—pave the way for one of the league's most prolific offenses. The short-yardage running could be better, but that's nit-picking.

2 Eagles LT William Thomas and RT Jon Runyan are reliable but aging bookends. RG Shawn Andrews is nearing elite status. The massive line is better suited for a power rushing attack than the team's pass-happy scheme.

3 Vikings LG Steve Hutchinson, C Matt Birk and LT Bryant McKinnie make life easier for RB Adrian Peterson, but McKinnie sometimes struggles in pass protection. The right side has been a problem but is improving.

4 Packers LT Chad Clifton and RT Mark Tauscher offer the security QB Aaron Rodgers needs, though Clifton isn't as strong in the running game. Feisty C Scott Wells uses technique and leverage to get the job done.

5 Giants The unit of LT David Diehl, LG Rich Seubert, C Shaun O'Hara, RG Chris Snee and RT Kareem McKenzie includes no superstar but has no weak link. It protects Eli Manning and excels in the power running game.

6 Redskins Injuries ravaged this unit last year, but two starters, RT Jon Jansen and RG Randy Thomas, are back. LT Chris Samuels is a perennial Pro Bowl player, and C Casey Rabach plays at a consistently high level.

7 Saints Except at center, the line has been together for the past two-plus years. RG Jahri Evans is a terrific run blocker who holds his own in pass protection. LT Jammal Brown (6-6, 313) is exceptionally athletic for his size.

8 Buccaneers With the addition of C Jeff Faine, the Bucs have a tough front five that is fast becoming the strength of the offense. Faine is flanked by two powerful guards, Arron Sears and Davin Joseph.

9 Seahawks LT Walter Jones still plays at a Pro Bowl level but is not as dominant as he once was. The team hopes the addition of LG Mike Wahle will add veteran leadership and help stabilize the running game.

10 Cardinals The starting group returns intact, providing continuity that should pay dividends. There are questions on the right



The Cowboys' Adams—all 6-7, 343 pounds of him—is a stop sign for speed rushers.

side, but C Al Johnson, LG Reggie Wells and LT Mike Gandy are steady contributors.

11 49ers The team has a budding star in Joe Staley, who will be more comfortable at left tackle than he was in a strong rookie season on the right side. Right tackle (Jonas Jennings or Barry Sims) is the main concern.

12 Rams A unit devastated by injuries last season needs the healthy return of LT Orlando Pace, a gifted pass blocker. LG Jacob Bell, an offseason pickup, adds stability. RT Alex Barron must stay focused and avoid penalties.

13 Panthers All five starting jobs will be filled by different players (at least in different spots), starting with rookie RT Jeff Otah and second-year C Ryan Kalil. There is tal-

ent on hand, but this is a major overhaul.

14 Bears The plan for rebuilding the line begins with rookie Chris Williams taking over at left tackle and veteran John Tait switching to right tackle. C Olin Kreutz is durable and plays with quickness and a nasty streak.

15 Lions LT Jeff Backus is a solid technician but struggles outside at times against speed rushers. C Dominic Raiola, who excels at getting to the second level, will have more opportunities to do that this season.

16 Falcons The unit disintegrated last season, and C Todd McClure is the only returning starter whose job is safe. New assistant Paul Boudreau will try to reassemble this group, starting with rookie LT Sam Baker.

TOP
5

TACKLES

1. Walter Jones, LT, Seahawks
2. Flozell Adams, LT, Cowboys
3. Chris Samuels, LT, Redskins
4. Chad Clifton, LT, Packers
5. Bryant McKinnie, LT, Vikings

GUARDS/CENTERS

1. Steve Hutchinson, LG, Vikings
2. Andre Gurode, C, Cowboys
3. Shawn Andrews, RG, Eagles
4. Leonard Davis, RG, Cowboys
5. Matt Birk, C, Vikings

INSIDE THE AFC

Why a big toe is a big deal in San Diego

TE Antonio Gates' big toe will be the biggest news in Chargers training camp until he can run full speed on a consistent basis. Word is he is progressing well and will be ready for the season. Not only does Gates make difficult catches, he often attracts two defenders and makes the path clearer for RB LaDainian Tomlinson.

BALTIMORE The coaches are impressed with rookie QB Joe Flacco's knowledge of the game and believe he is ahead of schedule in his understanding of the offense. He gets excellent velocity on his throws and is a better runner than expected.

BUFFALO Darian Barnes is the favorite to claim the fullback job during camp. The team has reinstated the position after a one-year absence, and Barnes has the physical, straight-line blocking skills the Bills want. He has decent size (6-2, 240) and good strength and toughness.

CINCINNATI Reserve SLB Ahmad Brooks has almost fallen off the radar while recovering from a groin injury that sidelined him 14 games in 2007. He is trying to make the move from the middle to the outside, a position he hasn't played before. His niche could be as a third-down pass rusher.

CLEVELAND Hank Fraley has been a rock at center the past two seasons. He is a polished technician who has a relentless work ethic and sets a tone in the locker room. He's 30, which probably means he has two or three good years left.

DENVER DE Jarvis Moss, limited to six games as a rookie because of a broken right ankle, reported no setbacks during minicamps. He almost certainly will be a part of the pass-rush package. The question is whether he can work himself into the rotation on running downs.

HOUSTON Rookie LB Xavier Adibi, who missed part of offseason workouts with a hamstring injury, has intrigued the team with his potential as a future starter. His best position is on the weak side, but he is learning all three positions. He has good speed and a long reach.

INDIANAPOLIS With SLB Tyjuan Hagler (pectoral) possibly out through the start of the season, there is an opportunity for Clint Session, Victor Worsley and rookie Philip Wheeler. Session showed in limited play last year he fits well in a defense that

requires its linebackers to be active in coverage.

JACKSONVILLE

MLB Mike Peterson, who broke his right hand in Week 11 last season and didn't come back, is entering the final year of his contract. His hand is healed, and he still has impressive speed and range. He struggles at times to get off blocks.

KANSAS CITY The broken foot that cost RB Larry Johnson the last half of last season shouldn't prevent him from getting 20-plus carries a game this year. His game was never based on quickness or speed. A bigger issue is whether the wear and tear of recent years might break him down.

MIAMI Ernest Wilford, Derek Hagan and Ted Ginn are the front-runners for the starting wide-out jobs, but the team could pursue a veteran to bolster competition. Ginn didn't do much during offseason practices to build the confidence of the quarterbacks.

NEW ENGLAND The release of S Willie Andrews because of legal troubles leaves a big hole on special teams. His departure opens a role that could be filled by rookie WR/DB Matt Slater, a burner who should factor into the coverage and return teams.

NEW YORK OLB Bryan Thomas slumped to 2½ sacks last season—and lost his job—after a

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



The Chargers won't rush Gates, who is coming off surgery on his big toe.

career-high 8½ in 2006. He needs to win one-on-one matchups more often. His performance likely will determine how quickly the Jets need to bring along rookie Vernon Gholston.

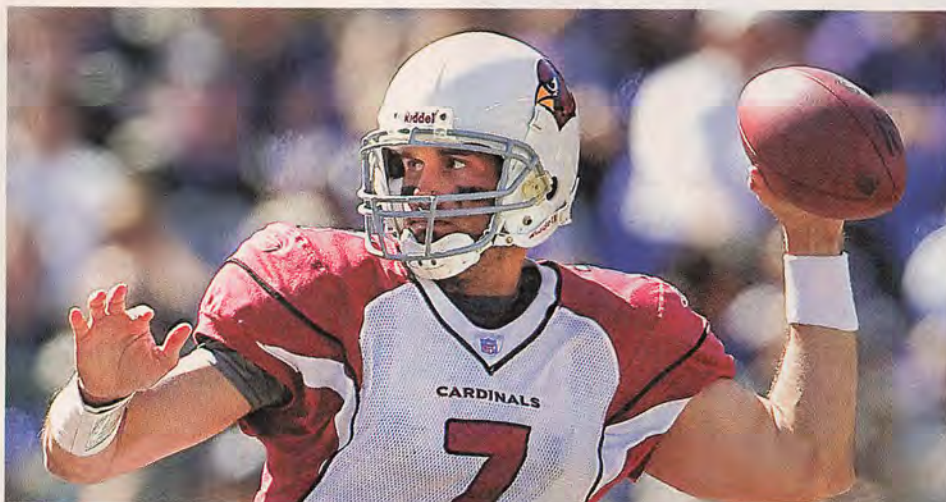
OAKLAND DT Tommy Kelly is recovering well from the knee ligament he tore last season. His health is vital to the defensive performance because he is being counted on to replace Warren Sapp and help the unit improve against the run.

PITTSBURGH The team cut Jared Zabransky and cleared the way for Dennis Dixon to be the third QB. The decision to draft Dixon could wind up being a good one because backup Charlie Batch will turn 34 in December. Dixon is coming off ACL surgery but has a strong arm and is a good runner.

TENNESSEE RB Chris Henry will have to fight for playing time because the depth chart is crowded with returning starter LenDale White and rookie Chris Johnson. Henry must do a better job on his initial read and improve in pass protection.

The Cardinals need to find a new way to excel in the red zone

One of Matt Leinart's biggest challenges in taking over for QB Kurt Warner is replicating the success the team had in the red zone last season. There were several reasons for it—and perhaps the biggest was Warner's ability to squeeze the ball into tightly covered receivers. Leinart hasn't shown the ability to make those throws, but he's more mobile. The club must adjust to fit his talents.



Leinart may not be able to fit the ball into tight spots, but his mobility could make up for it.

ATLANTA Coordinator Brian VanGorder is simplifying the defense and wants his linebackers to use more of an attacking style. Keep an eye on second-year LB Tony Taylor, who played for VanGorder at Georgia. Taylor, who is set to be the backup in the middle, is fast and has good striking ability.

CAROLINA Nothing will be more important in training camp than getting QB Jake Delhomme (elbow) back at 100 percent, and he hasn't had any setbacks yet. Team officials were confident enough in him—and in backup Matt Moore—that they didn't sign or draft a quarterback.

CHICAGO There has been a revolving door at nose tackle, but the Bears hope Dusty Dvoracek will bring some stability to the position. He missed all of the 2006 season and 15 games last year with injuries, but when healthy, Dvoracek (6-3, 303) has a good motor. He also fits the gap-shooting scheme well.

DALLAS Zach Thomas (neck, postconcussion symptoms) says he feels 100 percent—and he'll need to be to play at inside linebacker in the 3-4, which forces him to engage one-on-one with

guys who outweigh him by 80-100 pounds. The team wants his leadership and playmaking ability on the field.

DETROIT New CBs Brian Kelly and Leigh Bodden bring toughness at the line of scrimmage—which the Lions have lacked recently. Both corners jam receivers and alter their routes—which is crucial in the Tampa 2 scheme.

GREEN BAY Rookie WR Jordy Nelson doesn't do a lot of things great, but he does many things well. He struggled getting off bump-and-run coverage early in OTAs, but he has improved there and seems to have a good understanding of the offense. He could get some time in the slot.

MINNESOTA RB Adrian Peterson says he's completely recovered from knee problems that cost him two games last season. The team wants him to develop into a more consistent and reliable pass catcher, which he says he has been working on this offseason.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Sean Jensen; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Matt Barrows; Seattle, Scott Johnson; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

NEW ORLEANS The Saints are counting on CB Mike McKenzie to come back strong from knee surgery. Last year, he was by far their best player in the secondary, which is the weakest area of the roster. He's a confident player with the right mentality for matching up one-on-one with top receivers.

NEW YORK On first down, Mathias Kiwanuka will line up at linebacker. In the nickel package, he will slide up to end. Coaches realize Kiwanuka is a natural pass rusher, and they want him doing that as often as possible.

PHILADELPHIA As defensive coordinator Jim Johnson tinkers with his alignments to generate more pressure, he'll be creative with SLB Chris Gocong. Gocong occasionally rushed the quarterback from a down lineman's stance late last season, and he could do more of that. Depth at linebacker affords Johnson the opportunity to move Gocong around, especially in blitz packages.

ST. LOUIS Because of repeated injuries, WLB Pisa Tinoisamoa hasn't fulfilled the potential he exhibited in his first couple of years. Tinoisamoa still has top-end speed for the position, and because of his durability issues, he has something to prove.

SAN FRANCISCO RG David Baas is expected to recover from a torn pectoral muscle in time for the regular season, but his job might not be available when he returns. Tony Wragge has been filling in during Baas' absence, and rookie Chilo Rachal also could steal the starting job.

SEATTLE RB Julius Jones likely will win the starting job, and Maurice Morris will get plenty of carries, too. It's not clear yet how big back T.J. Duckett will be used. The specific roles are yet to be sorted out, but one thing appears clear: The running backs will be more involved in the passing game than Shaun Alexander was.

TAMPA BAY Second-year RE Gaines Adams has lost about 25 pounds and displayed a lot more diligence regarding his off-field and on-field work. In offseason workouts, Adams flashed a meaner approach. All are signs that Adams could be in for a breakthrough season.

WASHINGTON RE Andre Carter has the respect of his teammates for his work habits. He is one of the team's best-conditioned athletes and works constantly to improve his pass-rush moves and give opponents more to prepare for.

Stud alert

These guys have teased us with potential. Now they're ready to break out in a big way this fall. *By Matt Hayes*

Let there be no doubt about the impact Ricky Jean-Francois had on LSU's national title run last year. He played in all of two games—the SEC championship game and the BCS national title game—and it was abundantly clear:

"The best player on the field," says Nebraska coach Bo Pelini, LSU's defensive coordinator last season.

Let's put that statement into perspective. Also on the field in the BCS title game: LSU defensive tackle Glenn Dorsey (No. 5 overall pick in the NFL draft) and Ohio State defensive end Vernon Gholston (No. 6).

Jean-Francois, a junior defensive tackle, missed the first 12 games of the season while on academic suspension and was reinstated in time for the SEC championship game. He was on the field for 20 snaps against Tennessee because of conditioning issues, then got into shape over the next month and was dominant in the national title game against Ohio State, blocking a field goal and commanding double-teams on the interior.

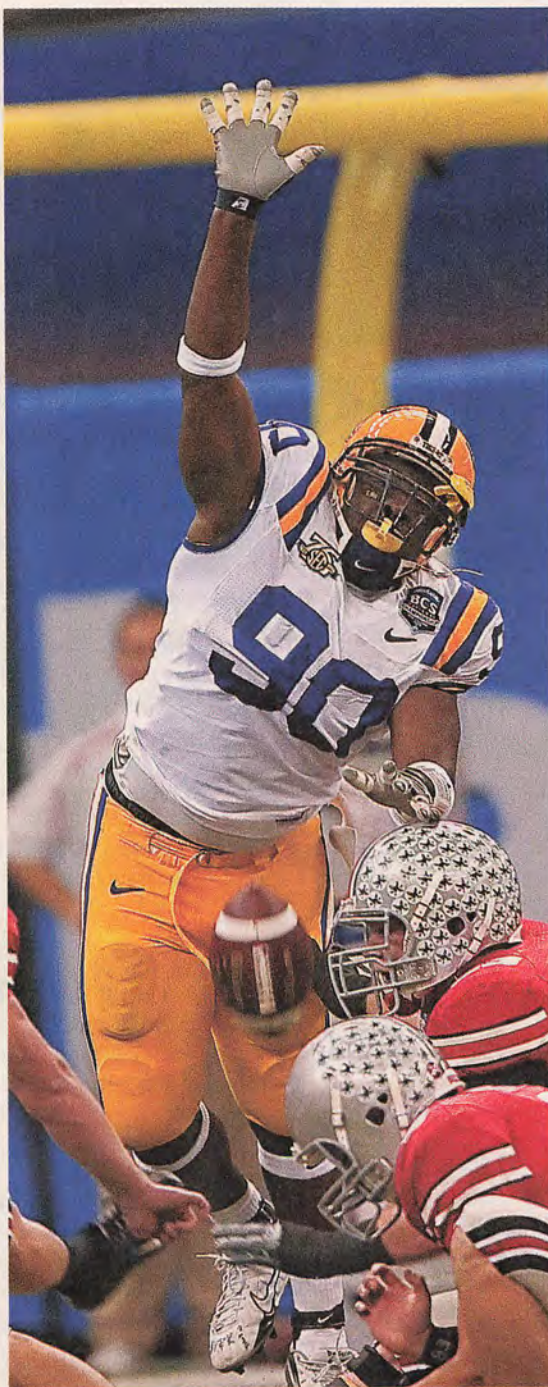
At one point, Pelini was running stunts to free up Jean-Francois.

"There's no doubt in my mind," says one AFC scout, "if (Jean-Francois) stays out of trouble and plays at a high level like he did in those two games, he could develop into the No. 1 overall pick in the draft."

Big words for a player with little experience. Jean-Francois (6-3, 281) was a top backup his first season, earning SPORTING NEWS Freshman All-American honors after solid play at tackle and end. A year later, in two games against premier competition and with the season riding on every play, he stood out.

Jean-Francois had nearly walked away from LSU his freshman year, when coach Les Miles pulled him into his office and handed out the suspension before the team's bowl game against Notre Dame. "A humbling experience," Jean-Francois says. "I just prayed that one stupid mistake wouldn't define me."

Now Jean-Francois has a chance to define himself on the field for a full season. Others ready to break out this fall:



Jean-Francois made his few plays count—his block of a field goal attempt sparked LSU's run against Ohio State.

LB Rolando McClain, 6-4, 255, So., Alabama

Scout's take: "I absolutely love this kid. Big run stuffer, plays with attitude. I always look for guys who kind of play on the edge, who enjoy the vicious aspect of the game. Rolando was a freshman last year; he didn't really get it all and had a huge season. I can't wait to watch him develop."

DE Jason Worldis, 6-2, 252, So., Virginia Tech

Scout's take: "This is a man here, folks. Whoa! As an end, strictly relating to NFL potential, he's not the typical size. But he has the get-off move on the edge. Speed, speed, speed. He didn't have any idea what he was doing last year, and that's to be expected of young guys. Wait until he understands what's going on. Holy cow, will he be good."

RB Mike Ford, 6-2, 225, So., South Florida

Scout's take: "Big, tough kid with good speed. He's a 20-carry guy in (the NFL). What I like best about him is he understands cutbacks and following zone blocking. He knows where to go, but it's obvious his ball security issues have made him a little tentative in hitting holes."



Worldis (43), who had 2½ sacks last year, was a beast during spring practice.



Ford put up big numbers when he got the chance to start last year in the final three games of the regular season.

DE Lawrence Wilson, 6-4, 274, Jr., Ohio State

Scout's take: "Saw him a couple of times as a freshman, then saw him in the spring before last fall, before he got hurt in the first game of the season. Still have my notes: 'Wilson better than Gholston?' The complete package. He can stop the run, and his size and wingspan—he's 280 pounds for goodness sake—are impossible for those poor (offensive) tacklers."

RB DeMarco Murray, So., 6-0, 191, Oklahoma

Scout's take: "Bob (Stoops) has had a bunch of terrific runners there, and I'm telling you, this kid could be his best. Including (Adrian) Peterson. His speed, he hits the high gear immediately. He's a hard runner, but he's not the tough inside guy Peterson was. At least not yet."

Murray, coming off knee surgery, hopes to play at 215 pounds this fall.

Also ready to shine

ACC

DE Allen Bailey, 6-4, 287, So., Miami
SS Myron Rolle, 6-2, 218, Jr., Florida State

Big East

DE Greg Romeus, 6-5, 250, So., Pitt
WR Marcus Barnett, 6-2, 164, So. Cincinnati

Big Ten

LB Martez Wilson, 6-4, 246, So., Illinois
OT Rocco Cironi, 6-6, 305, Jr., Michigan State

Big 12

WR Dezmon Briscoe, 6-3, 200, So., Kansas
WR Josh Smith, 6-0, 180, So., Colorado

Pac-10

RB LaGarrette Blount, 6-2, 230, Jr., Oregon
WR Nyan Boateng, 6-2, 210, Jr., California

SEC

RB Chris Rainey, 5-9, 167, Fr., Florida
WR Gerald Jones, 6-0, 185, So., Tennessee

Outside the BCS

QB Case Keenum, 6-1, 210, So., Houston
QB Justin Willis, 6-1, 210, Jr., SMU
RB Ryan Mathews, 5-11, 205, So., Fresno State
QB Nate Davis, 6-2, 217, Jr., Ball State

—Matt Hayes

DE Everson Griffen, 6-3, 265, So., USC

Scout's take: "In two years, we'll all be talking about who's in line to pick Griffen No. 1. He started really slow last year, and then it all clicked. He was unblockable at times. Wait until (USC coach) Pete (Carroll) gets his technique and motor to catch up to his desire. Wow, will he be terrific."

WR Duval Kamara, 6-5, 222, So., Notre Dame

Scout's take: "Saw them twice last year, and he's the only guy on offense who looked comfortable. He knows how to get off the jam (at the line of scrimmage), knows how to use his hands to separate. He's got good speed. Once he figures out how to use his big frame to shield himself, he'll be a terror. No one in college football will be able to match up with him—no one."

Will the Dawgs, without Uga VI, still have their day?

The signs point to an epic struggle in Jacksonville

By Matt Hayes

mhayes@sportingnews.com

My first thought was the great soothsayer Mentalo. You remember those dolls when you were a kid, right? Ask a question, pull the string, get an answer. If anyone anywhere can help me channel Uga VI in the afterworld, Mentalo can. Don't ever doubt his awesome, overwhelming powers.

Then I thought of the Magic 8-Ball. Who among us hasn't rolled that black ball through sweaty palms, hoping against hope the mystic liquid revealed *Signs Point To Yes*?

Finally, I broke down and spent \$40 of SPORTING NEWS' loot to see Natasha.

You know, she of Readings by Natasha in Orlando. And right out of the box, she knew something was wrong:

Natasha: "You look troubled."

Me: "I lost my friend, Uga."

Natasha: "She was special to you; the pain is

overwhelming."

Me: "Something like that."

At this point, I reach into my pocket and pull out my business card. I explain that SN has picked Georgia to win it all this season and that Uga—who most certainly was all male—had gone to the great Junkyard in the sky. Is this bad karma or some horrible omen?

Natasha draws the shades, lights some incense and tells me to focus my energy, my eternal love of *Ooo-ga*, on the candle in the middle of the table.

"I see he was the best," Natasha says. "Very strong, a leader."

"Damn good dog," I mumble.

Natasha says she sees heat—and as eerie as it sounds, it's getting warm in this dungeon of a room where our seance is heating up. If it weren't 98 degrees in The City Beautiful, and if her wall unit weren't spitting tepid air, I'd have been flat-out spooked.

"Tempe!" I blurt out. "Ask Uga about Arizona State!"

Natasha tells me she sees a great battle, waged on different continents against many armies. "Ooo-ga," she says, "speaks of long days and nights of pain and suffering."

"Wait," I interject, scribbling frantically, "did

you say continents or *conferences*?"

It is within this great battle, Natasha says, where "fate and destiny will become one." There will be numerous conflicts, some with retreat, some with forged advancement.

I ask about double-overtime games. She gives me the same look I give her every time she says *Ooo-ga*.

"Breathe in the moment,"

she says.

(It is here where I start scanning my BlackBerry).

There will come a time, she continues—two fortnights from the first days of autumn—when the battle will be most fierce. The Chosen One will lead the enemies.

"The Great Nemesis of Ooo-ga," Natasha says ominously, "is looming."

At this point, I'm desperately trying to remember two things: the start of autumn and the length of a fortnight. And then it hits me.

The start of autumn is the end of September; two fortnights is four weeks ... it's the beginning of November!

"Tebow!" I blurt out. "The Chosen One!"

"What," she says, "is a Tebow?"

What a waste of 40 bucks. **SN**

The Bulldogs don't need a psychic to tell them Arizona State and Florida will be tough foes.

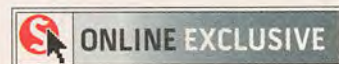
speedread

The Big Ten Network will follow Illinois for an all-access trip through the season. This tells me one thing: Illini coach Ron Zook must be very confident about his team. No coach wants cameras in his locker room and around his squad if things could get shaky.

Recent changes and retirements in the BCS hierarchy could slow the negotiation of television rights for the new series contract that begins with the 2010 season. Three heavy hitters—the Notre Dame athletic director and the Pac-10 and Big East commissioners—must be replaced. Pac-10 presidents want former Stanford A.D. **Ted Leland** as the new commissioner, and he would wield a heavy hand in negotiations. ➤ Penn State coach **Joe Paterno** is telling recruits his successor will come from his current staff. If that's the case, it's defensive coordinator **Tom Bradley**, the program's best recruiter and the coach who handles much of the day-to-day operations in Happy Valley. The only other



complete. No one will beat Jones when the BCS opens bids for its five bowl games—possibly as early as this fall.



Kickoff is closer than you think—and we're counting down our top 50 teams to get you ready at sportingnews.com.

The not-so-mighty Casey has struck out.

Mears must hope for another chance

By Kenny Bruce

Casey Mears survived the arrival of Dale Earnhardt Jr. But Mears couldn't beat the numbers. Or the expectations. Or the availability of Mark Martin, who says he will make one final run for a Cup title.

That run will come with Hendrick Motorsports at Mears' expense.

Mears will leave the No. 5 HMS Chevrolet at the end of 2008 after just two years in the organization. He'll be replaced by Martin, 49, who cut back to a partial schedule in 2007 but has quality credentials, which means all four HMS cars could be championship contenders next season.

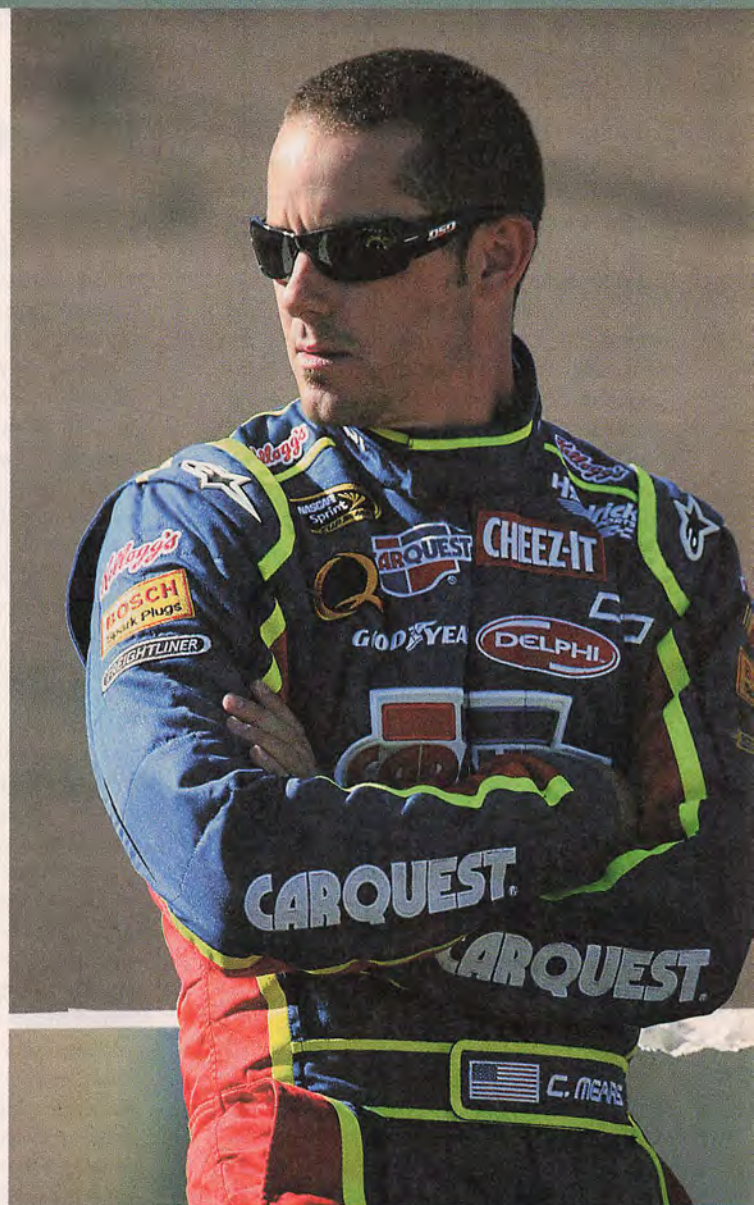
Mears, who departed Chip Ganassi Racing to sign with Hendrick before the 2007 season, held on to his job when team owner Rick Hendrick needed a seat for Earnhardt Jr. heading into 2008. Kyle Busch was shown the door instead, despite a record that included four Cup wins and two Chase appearances.

Now that move isn't looking so hot

for the Hendrick organization—Busch has six wins for Joe Gibbs Racing and has been atop the points standings for much of the season. Mears has done little since moving into the seat vacated by Busch. That move paired Mears with a team that had already shown it could win and contend for the championship with the right driver. But Mears is 24th in points after 18 races and has only one top five.

Despite his lack of success, Mears has a lot going for him. At 30, he's just reaching his prime as a racer. He's intelligent, well-spoken and a sponsor's dream. And though his family doesn't have a long history in stock car racing, it's one of the best-known in the open-wheel ranks—his father Roger was a successful open-wheel and off-road racer and his uncle Rick won the Indianapolis 500 four times.

But what Casey doesn't have are the statistics to keep one of the top rides in NASCAR. He is scheduled to make his 200th start in a few weeks (at Indianapolis) but in 5½ years has just one victory and only



There's a lot to like about Mears, but it might be tough for him to land with an elite team unless he closes strong this season.

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12 top five finishes.

Part of that likely is because he spent the first three years of his career at Ganassi, an organization that has struggled to field competitive teams. But when Mears moved to Hendrick, he was expected to take his game to the next level. Maybe not quite to the level of teammates Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson, but top 15 finishes should have been the norm rather than the exception. And that hasn't played well this year with Earnhardt, Johnson and Gordon all solidly in the top 10 in points.

In less than two years, the No. 5 team has changed just about everything but its mailing address, all to no avail. Hendrick finally decided a big change was necessary.

That Mears didn't consistently contend for wins at Hendrick won't play well at the bargaining table as he searches for a job for 2009 and beyond. His team was top-shelf, and he admits the four HMS teams have no qualms about sharing information. For whatever reason, Mears and his group just never clicked.

Still, he is an experienced driver, and experienced drivers generally don't have to worry about finding work. With the right people around him, there's a chance Mears can turn his fortunes around.

"There actually are some good opportunities out there right now," Mears says. "I'm pleasantly surprised. I wasn't thinking about it a whole lot ... (I wasn't) in that mind-set. But I'm definitely talking to people."

A change was definitely needed for Hendrick's No. 5 car. And Mears probably needed a change, too. Busch made the best of his departure by helping a good team move to the next level. Now Mears hopes he gets another chance to do the same. **SN**

Kenny Bruce is assistant managing editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Bruce at scenedaily.com.

Martin is recharged for a final run

Heeee's baaaack ... well, full time, that is.

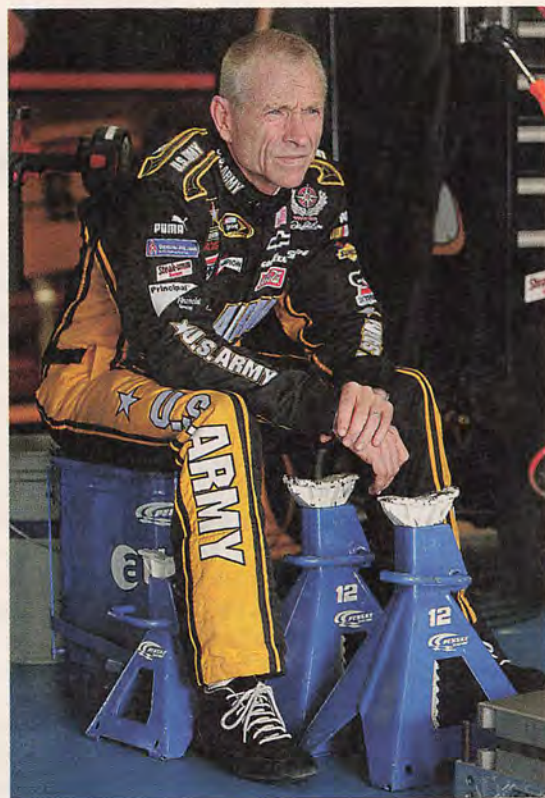
Mark Martin, the driver who started talking about retirement in 2004, will be in a full-time ride next year for the first time since 2006. He signed up last week with Hendrick Motorsports and will compete for the 2009 Sprint Cup championship in the No. 5 Chevrolet, Casey Mears' current ride. Alan Gustafson will be Martin's crew chief.

Martin, 49, has been running partial schedules for Ginn Racing and Dale Earnhardt Inc., which merged with Ginn in July 2007, since he left Roush Racing after the 2006 season.

Martin says the partial seasons have refreshed him and reignited his desire to win races and compete for the championship that has eluded him since 1982, his first full season in Cup racing.

"After two years of catching my breath, I've learned I've enjoyed it," says Martin, who has 35 Cup wins and has finished second in the championship standings four times. "It's been very meaningful to my family and myself, but I've also learned it's rekindled my passion for racing and what it means to me. It's given me a taste of what it would be like to not have that in my life."

Martin is unconcerned how others might feel about his penchant for changing his mind about his



future plans. "I want to win another race before I can't anymore," he says. "I make no apologies for not knowing what my whole life holds for me."

For now, he has a one-year full-time deal. Martin is scheduled to drive for Hendrick part time in 2010 and share the ride with a driver or drivers to be named. —Reid Spencer

Martin will have the equipment and resources to contend for the Cup title that has eluded him.

Pit Box

NASCAR experts Roger Kuznia and Reid Spencer size up the upcoming race—and each other's analysis—every week in the Pit Box. This week: LifeLock.com 400

Who will win at Chicagoland?

7:30 p.m. ET Saturday, TNT

Roger: I'm pumped to see Chicagoland hold its first night race, and the lights will shine brightest on Jimmie Johnson. Aside from his 37th-place finish there last year because of a blown engine, Johnson had finished no worse than sixth in the five previous races at the track. You can't spell Lowe's without a 'W,' which Johnson will earn Saturday night.

Reid: Matt Kenseth is the man for Chicagoland. The driver from Wisconsin has had only one finish worse than 14th at the 1.5-mile speedway in Joliet, and that was in 2006, when Jeff Gordon spun the No. 17 Ford in the closing stages of the race and dropped Kenseth from first to 22nd. Look for Kenseth to improve one position from last year's runner-up finish.

Last week: Reid rode to victory lane at Daytona with his pick of Kyle Busch, who won for the sixth time this season, while Roger limped home with Denny Hamlin, who finished 26th.



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After a decade of irrelevance, the young, free agent-enhanced Blackhawks are ready to have some fun—and make a serious playoff splash.

Power surge

By Craig Custance

ccustance@sportingnews.com

When you're Patrick Kane, hockey's reigning rookie of the year, you don't track NHL free agency like everybody else. You tap directly into the source.

Before July 1, the Blackhawks forward was tipped off by general manager Dale Tallon to expect something big. So when Kane returned from a workout on the opening day of free agency and there wasn't a lot of news surrounding the Blackhawks, he tried to find out why.

From the basement of his parents' home in Buffalo, Kane started texting a friend in the Chicago front office.

Quickly he found out the team was in the running for Wade Redden and Brian Campbell, the two most sought-after defensemen on the market. His only thought about landing one of those puck movers was, "It'd be sick"

Then he received this text: "Soup is in."

The Blackhawks had landed Campbell, the biggest prize of the first day of free agency, signing the former Buffalo and San Jose stand-out to an eight-year deal worth \$56.8 million. The same day, they also signed the best goalie on the market, Cristobal Huet, to a four-year deal worth \$22.4 million.

And just like that, the young Blackhawks were power players on hockey's free-agent market. The most irrelevant Original Six franchise of the past 10 years is back.

"We had to do something," says Tallon. "If we just sat still, it would have been 'Same old Blackhawks.' We felt like it was necessary to be aggressive."

Tallon says he felt something on the outset of this period of free agency: a demand from players to be part of the rebirth of hockey in Chicago.

Not even a year has passed since Kane first sat on the bench during a game at the United Center and was nudged by fellow rookie Jonathan Toews, who pointed out all the empty seats.

"There were 7,000 people in the building, and Toews was like 'Geez, we need to fill this building



Something big is happening in Chicago, and Kane figures to be front and center in the Blackhawks' transformation.

BRIAN KESSEY / AP

out," Kane says.

The young core of the Blackhawks, which starts with Kane and Toews but also includes center Patrick Sharp and defenseman Duncan Keith, did just that, sparking a playoff push that played out in front of packed houses.

A home November win over Columbus drew an announced crowd of 9,717. A shootout win over the same Blue Jackets on March 30 drew 20,885.

That's why it was imperative for Tallon to make the splash he did on July 1. The Blackhawks and their young stars started something last season; the general manager wanted to make sure it continued into the offseason. If there's such a thing as *summer* momentum in hockey, the Blackhawks have it.

According to Tallon, the day after he signed Huet and Campbell, the team sold nearly 200 season-ticket packages, worth roughly \$250,000.

Chris Werner, the team's senior executive director of ticketing, couldn't confirm exact numbers but said his staff was working after hours to handle the extra phone calls.

In past years, Chicago didn't even bother selling season tickets in July. This year, the renewal rate is approaching 100 percent.

In past years, Chicago didn't even bother selling season tickets in July. This year, the renewal rate is approaching 100 percent.

But a big day of free agency guarantees nothing. Tallon knows he overpaid for Campbell, and there's always risk when you sign a goaltender to a four-year deal. The Capitals coveted Huet but weren't comfortable offering the four-year term Chicago put up.

And the Blackhawks have salary cap issues, partly because of the \$12 million tied up in goaltending this season between Huet and incumbent Nikolai Khabibulin. Khabibulin is slated to earn \$6.75 million this season, which makes him a logical target in trade talk.

Not lost in the Chicago buzz was that the best available player on the market, Marian Hossa, passed up tens of millions of dollars to sign a one-year deal with division rival Detroit. That's why coach Denis Savard knows that being a winner on July 1 doesn't mean anything when the puck drops.

Sure, getting help for his power play and a boost in goal on Tuesday might have made Thursday's round of golf and cookout with a group of friends a little more enjoyable.

But that's as far as the celebration got.

"I don't take anything for granted," Savard says. "Come September, we have a lot of work in front of us. But it's going to be fun."

SN

Offseason wheeling and dealing

The winners

① **Columbus.** The Blue Jackets aren't at the point where they're ready to add that final high-priced piece, but general manager Scott Howson did a fine job rebuilding the defense and adding skill. Through trades and free agency, the Blue Jackets boosted their talent by acquiring forward Kristian Huselius and defenseman Fedor Tyutin, Christian Backman and Mike Commodore. Even though the Blue Jackets have never made the playoffs, Howson has been able to add significant pieces. "We don't have a winning tradition here yet. I don't think people outside of Columbus believe we can win the Stanley Cup in the immediate future," Howson says. "Those are things we have to work hard to overcome."

② **Detroit.** For months, Marian Hossa said free agency was a huge opportunity that doesn't happen often in the career of a hockey player. And we thought he was alluding to the opportunity to cash in. But Hossa passed on millions of dollars elsewhere to sign a one-year, \$7.4 million deal with the Red Wings—because he wants to win a Stanley Cup. The Wings also re-signed defenseman Brad Stuart to a four-year deal and added quality

backup goalie Ty Conklin.

③ **Tampa Bay.** The Lightning did most of their spending before July 1, signing forwards Gary Roberts, Ryan Malone and Vaclav Prospal after acquiring their negotiating rights. They also made a significant offer to forward Brian Rolston, who ultimately picked the Devils. Once free agency started, the Lightning added forward Radim Vrbata and got insurance in goal by signing veteran Olaf Kolzig. The spending spree made defenseman Dan Boyle (32) expendable, and the Lightning did well to trade him and his six-year, \$40 million contract to San Jose for defenseman Matt Carle, picks and a prospect.



The losers

① **Buffalo.** The Sabres have quickly gone from one of the elite teams in the Eastern Conference to an afterthought, and nothing the team did in the first few days of free agency changed that.

Originally thought to be in the mix for defenseman Brooks Orpik, the Sabres reportedly never made a serious offer. Buffalo eventually addressed the defense by adding veteran Craig Rivet in a solid deal with San Jose but then dealt winger Steve Bernier to Vancouver that same day. Bernier was a key to last year's trade of Brian Campbell to San Jose—and now he's gone.

② **Boston.** The Bruins were hot after Hossa, and their summer grade would be significantly higher if he had opted to join good friend Zdeno Chara in Boston. But Hossa picked Detroit, and the Bruins instead signed Canadiens winger Michael Ryder to a three-year deal, even though Ryder's numbers dropped considerably last season. One G.M. said he was willing to give Ryder an opportunity to bounce back, but not with a raise.

③ **Colorado.** The Avs lost goalie Jose Theodore and winger Andrew Brunette and didn't sign any suitable replacements. After making a big statement in free agency last year, Colorado appears more interested in giving its younger players ice time. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it is if the kids don't produce. The return of Peter Forsberg and Joe Sakic would soften the blow of a lackluster offseason, but things could get ugly if both retire. —Craig Custance

Commodore is one of several offseason additions who could help the Blue Jackets earn their first playoff berth.

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The longer 3-point shot should create more space for offenses to operate—if the guys shooting it come through.

A game of 12 inches

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

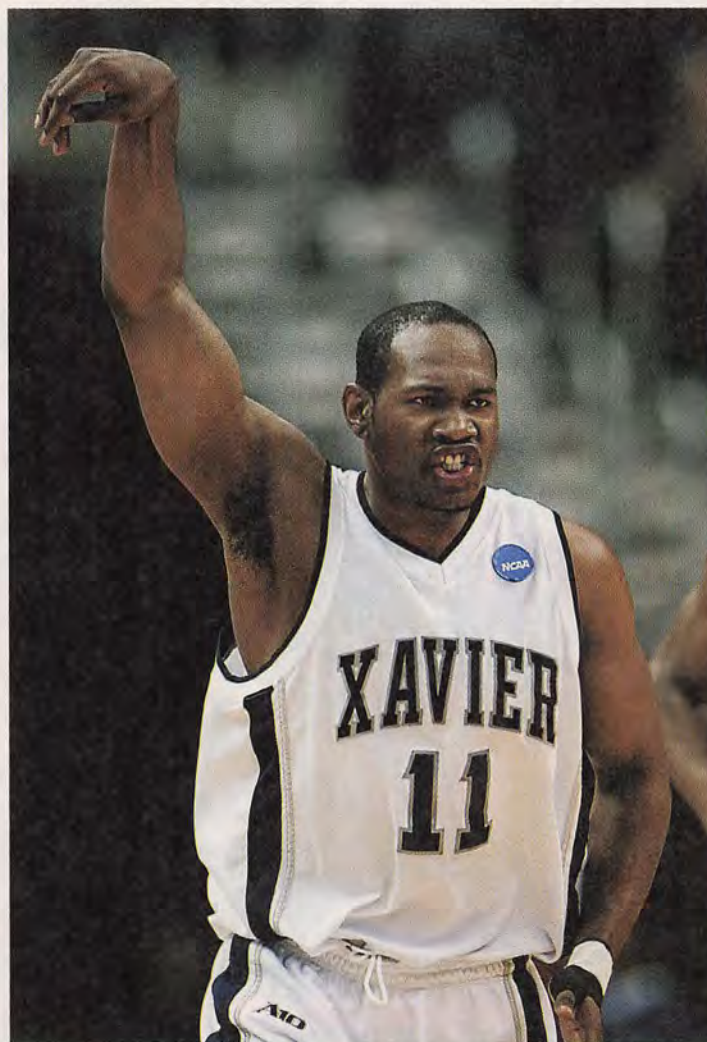
Would the most important long-distance jumper in Xavier basketball history have counted for 3 points if the NCAA's new 20-foot, 9-inch arc had been in place for last season's NCAA Tournament? B.J. Raymond has no idea.

"It doesn't matter," he says. "I would have scooted back some, anyway."

Raymond's right-corner 3-pointer off an inbounds pass from guard Stanley Burrell beat a lapsing shot clock and effectively ended any hope West Virginia maintained of keeping the Musketeers from their second Elite Eight appearance in four years. But Raymond doesn't think much about that shot now. It takes him a while to recall all the facts. He is more focused on making sure he is ready when the longer distance goes into effect this fall.

Although Xavier is planning to resurface its court at the Cintas Center, the coaches made sure the new line was painted on to the floor soon after last season so the Musketeers could start growing accustomed to it. The change doesn't seem that profound. A fellow with a pair of Size 8 loafers can place his heel on the new line and his toes dangle over the old one.

The NCAA basketball rules committee nonetheless is hopeful that moving the 3-point line 12 inches farther from the basket will create more space for halfcourt offenses to operate. The idea is that defenders collapsing to contain penetration or to double-team low-post scorers will have farther to travel to recover and contest long-range shots. So defenders might remain closer to offensive players on the perimeter, creating



Raymond won't have any problem scooting back and letting fly from the new distance, a change aimed at helping halfcourt offenses.

Players who have proved themselves won't be affected much. But 'experimental' 3-point shooters will find the new distance daunting.

room to drive. They could be less eager to drop to the lane and choke off drives or double down on the low post because they'll worry they can't make it back in time to challenge 3-point shooters.

"The fear of the 3-point line is every bit as present as it's been," Xavier coach Sean Miller says. "But the more you're stretched out, it's one foot farther that you have to deal with. That will free up the low-post area some. I also think it will free up

some more spacing for drives—I would hope."

Through observation, Raymond and Miller have come to the same conclusion: Players who have already proved themselves as shooters won't be affected much—but those who are, using Miller's term, "experimental" 3-point shooters will find the new distance daunting.

"How that works as a coach—I think you'd be less likely to believe in that experimental 3-point shooter," Miller says.

Raymond made 82 3-pointers last season, the most for the Atlantic 10 champions, though he averaged only 23.1 minutes per game. He hit 41.2 percent of his attempts. There will be no trust issues for Raymond and his Xavier coaches regarding the use of his jump shot.

But Miller might have worried if he had watched Raymond during the first week with the new line. "When I first went out there, it was horrible for me," Raymond says. "I was missing a lot of shots off the front rim that I'd usually make. Coming off the move, things like that, you're so used to shooting it the same way and it was just falling short."

"As a player, on the court, I was broke."

After some tinkering, though, he was fine. Raymond considers himself a "line-conscious" player. Most players stay within the court's boundaries simply by using instinct. They know where they are in relation to the sideline and baseline. But Raymond explains that his quest to stay behind the 3-point line is a visual endeavor. He checks his feet to make sure they're where they need to be.

"You kind of got to know," Raymond says. "You've got to have a look. Because the worst shot in the game is when you're stepping on the 3-point line. You don't ever want to do that."

In addition to attacking the new 3-point line, Raymond is attempting to lose 15 pounds (eating a diet of turkey and cheese sandwiches for breakfast, lunch and dinner) so he can move from reserve small forward to starter at shooting guard. That would make Xavier a huge team—Raymond is 6-7—and ensure there is a proven 3-point threat in the lineup. Raymond plans to show off a nice midrange game and improve defensively. But he knows what he is as a player.

"A shooter shoots," Raymond says. He needs to put a little more mustard on the ball now, but successfully navigating those 12 extra inches could make such a player even more valuable. **SN**

INSIDE DISH

When **Brandon Miller** left Ohio State last spring to get experience as an assistant coach at Butler after years of working for **Thad Matta** in administrative positions, Matta suggested it would be wise if Miller did not buy a house in Indianapolis. Matta knew there was a good chance Buckeyes associate head coach **John Groce** would be moving on to run his own program, and last month he got the job at Ohio U. Matta wasted little time inviting Miller to rejoin the Buckeyes staff, this time as an assistant coach. **Archie Miller**, brought in a year ago from Arizona State, will become Ohio State's lead assistant. ➤ Davidson extended coach **Bob McKillop**'s contract to 2016—when he will be closing in on age 66. That provides McKillop the security to resist other offers as schools with higher profiles and bigger budgets pursue the coaching star of the 2008 NCAA Tournament. McKillop says he was most pleased by the Davidson administration's decision to increase the budget for his assistant coaches: **Matt Matheny**, **Jim Fox** and **Matt McKillop**. Matheny has been with McKillop for 15 years and Fox for seven. ➤ New Detroit coach **Ray McCallum** has built a staff that could return the Titans to prominence in the Horizon League. Some high-major schools missed on the chance to hire former Western Illinois coach **Derek Thomas**, one of the best Midwest recruiters, and McCallum grabbed him last week to complete his staff. Thomas is the third former head coach to join McCallum; the others are **Jay Smith**, who coached **Chris Kaman** at

Central Michigan, and **Carlos Briggs**, who led the junior college program at Schoolcraft College (Mich.) and remained from **Perry Watson's** Titans staff.

➤ You read here earlier about the importance of Pitt F **Sam Young**'s being invited to work as a counselor at Nike's Vince Carter Skills Academy so he could absorb some lessons about perimeter play as he transitions from functioning primarily as a power forward. It turned out his experience there was a smash. Observers report Young dominated the other top college wings who worked the camp. ➤ Small forward **Jordan Hamilton** of Compton, Calif., is considered one of the top 20 prospects in the 2009 recruiting class, but he did not create a positive initial impression at Nike's Paul Pierce Skills Academy. Hamilton frequently was passive during early drills at the camp, although he eventually became more assertive. **Michael Snaer** of Moreno Valley, Calif., who ranked far lower than Hamilton, drew raves for his intensity and desire to improve. ➤ When Xavier, Virginia Tech, Missouri and Southern California agreed to play in the Puerto Rico Shootout, the pitch was that the event would feature four major programs and four strong mid-majors. Then Memphis became available, and the field got a whole lot tougher. Memphis will headline one half of the bracket and Virginia Tech the other. The tournament is scheduled around Thanksgiving.

speedreads

It seems the Indiana administration can't help but embarrass itself. When president Michael McRobbie told the NCAA infractions committee that hiring Kelvin Sampson was "a risk that should not have been taken" and that the university regrets making that move, it was just one more attempt to direct blame elsewhere. A.D. Rick Greenspan's resignation was one step toward fixing what's wrong. Hiring a replacement with a clue would be another.

Why it sometimes pays to "invest" in one's career: Ben Howland took a pay cut to accept the UCLA job in 2003 because he wanted to return to California and knew the Bruins could compete for national titles. He demonstrated his worth by leading them to three consecutive Final Fours, and now he's making money similar to that of his peers: just under \$2 million next season, \$2.3 million by 2015. Plus incentives.

A scout who works for seven European teams at varying levels says none has interest in Brandon Jennings, the Arizona recruit who suggests he might spend the 2008-09 season making big money playing abroad while he waits for the NBA draft. International teams are far more interested in Jason Richards, who helped Davidson to the Elite Eight and has appeal because of his strength, maturity and the possibility he'll join a team for more than one year.



Young proved to be a quick study in learning the lessons of perimeter play.



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Mike DeCourcy is hitting the road for the first batch of recruiting camps and tournaments in the NCAA summer evaluation period. Catch up with him at sportingnews.com.

Big money and big decisions ratchet up the pressure in a hurry.

Free-agent fantasy is soon all too real

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

This was supposed to be a dull free-agent class led by a handful of top-shelf stars expected to remain with their current teams. Franchises seeking upgrades were expected to be stuck trying to separate wheat and chaff among second-tier players.

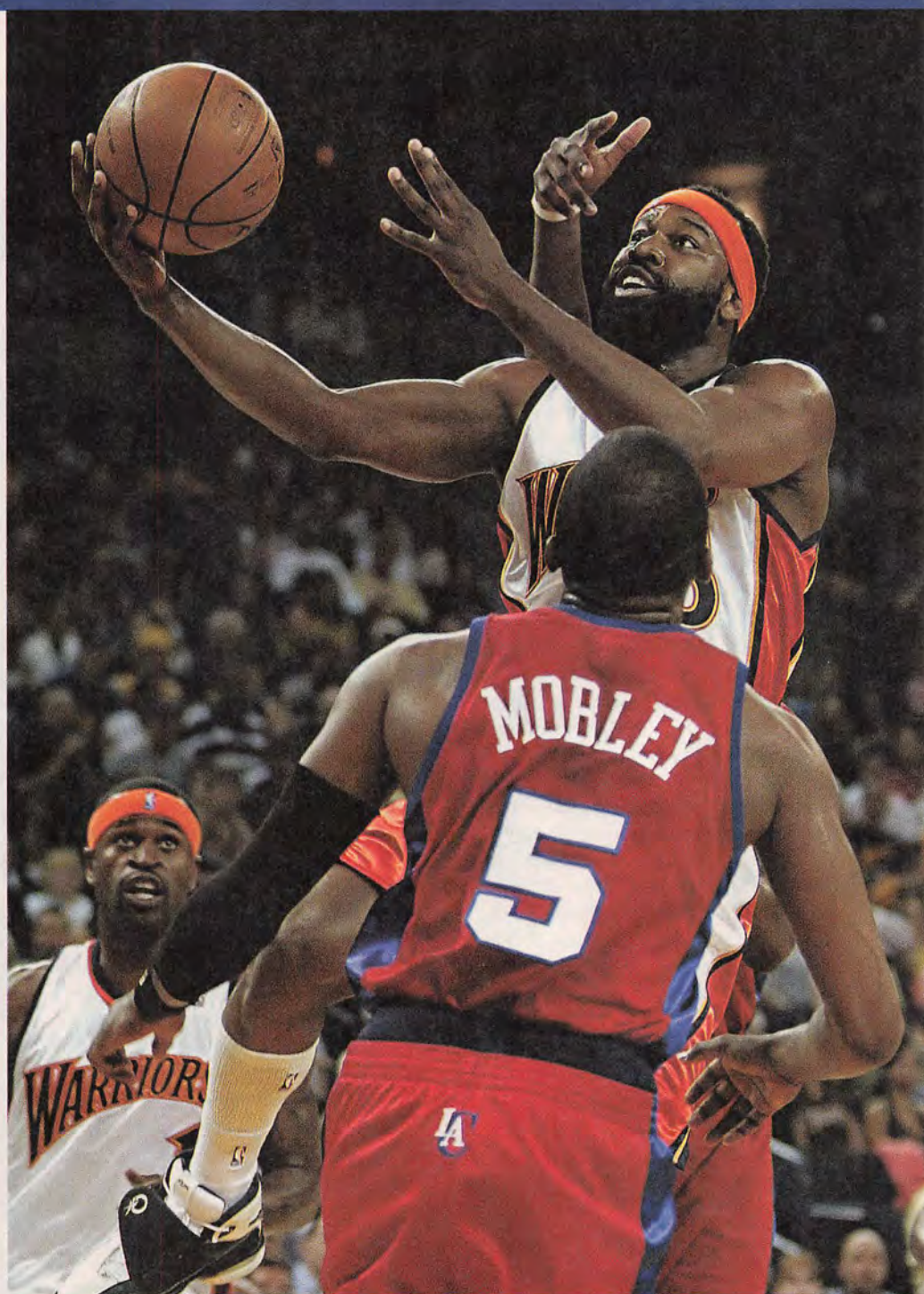
But on the eve of free agency, that notion went haywire as Baron Davis opted out of the final year of his contract with the Warriors and Elton Brand did likewise in his deal with the Clippers. With Wizards star Gilbert Arenas already declaring himself opted out, the league suddenly had three marquee players on the market and some teams sporting unexpected salary cap space.

Davis took the opportunity to head south to his old stomping grounds, accepting a five-year, \$65 million contract from the Clippers. The Warriors, newly point guard-free, made a strong play for Arenas, forcing the Wizards to up their offer to an astounding six years and \$111 million. Brand entered the week looking at other offers but seemed to be ready to welcome Davis to L.A., more confident that he had a legitimate chance to win a championship with the Clippers.

Early-July shufflings are easy—there's an unreality, a fantasy-sports quality, in seeing Davis becoming a Clipper. But when November comes around, the consequences of these moves will be apparent because the folks involved will find themselves tailed by a new shadow: pressure. Lots of it.

Gilbert Arenas. A couple of years ago, Wizards president Ernie Grunfeld was in his office, consid-

Some folks in Golden State insist Davis' departure is not such a bad thing.



Davis will look good on the court in L.A. ... as long as he can stay on the court.

ering the aspects of Arenas' personality that make him so well-loved by fans in Washington and around the game. Arenas is a different sort of character—his offbeat antics are well-documented, whether it's taking a shower in uniform at half-time, launching jerseys into the stands after games or making outrageous claims on his blog. "They forgot to tell Gilbert how an All-Star is supposed to act," Grunfeld said. "Everyone loves him for it."

A commitment of \$111 million from your organization changes things, though. Arenas' talent is undeniable. So is his goofiness. He will have to tone down the latter because Washington is

entrusting him to be more than a high-scoring sideshow. He's 26 now, at his peak. The Wizards are making him the franchise leader, for better or worse. If they forgot to tell Arenas how an All-Star is supposed to act, they had better tell him how a leader acts.

Baron Davis. Some sources in Golden State insist Davis' departure is not such a bad thing, even though he was the team's most popular player. That's because, in the past five years, Davis played in just 75 percent of his team's games. The Warriors had attempted to sign Davis, 28, to an extension based on the deals received by point guards

Two of the more important free-agent situations this summer will be those of Hawks PF **Josh Smith** and G/F **Josh Childress**, who are both restricted free agents. The Hawks are still coping with an unsettled ownership situation, one that could set back the progress of a team that showed promise by taking the NBA champion Celtics to seven games in the playoffs. General manager **Rick Sund** has let other teams know that he will match any offers for Smith or Childress. But if the offers are big enough, some league sources say, ownership could override Sund. ➤ The 76ers, one of the few teams with cap space, are taking strong aim at the list of restricted free agents, including the Hawks' two Joshes. The list of unrestricted free

INSIDE DISH

➤ PG **Beno Udrih** surprised almost no one by returning to the Kings, who had given him a chance as a starter after he played a bit role with San Antonio. Sacramento gave him the full midlevel exception for five years, a deal worth nearly \$35 million. ➤ Bucks SF **Richard Jefferson**, traded from the Nets on draft night, is said to be unhappy with the deal. Folks in New Jersey know that Jefferson can be prickly when he is unhappy. We'll see how that plays with ever-

agents is unimpressive, and the Sixers want to help their team immediately, so the goal is to work on restricted free agents until a team decides not to match the offer. ➤ In need of a point guard, the Warriors are expected to see what they can get in a trade for PF **Al Harrington**.

grumbling coach **Scott Skiles**. ➤ The Lakers have made re-signing SG **Sasha Vujacic** and PF **Ronny Turiaf**, both restricted free agents, their offseason priority. Lakers G.M. **Mitch Kupchak** met with Vujacic and his agent, **Bill Duffy**, on the second official day of free agency last week. "We're going to try to get a sense of what the parameters are to make a deal work," Duffy says. "I think that both sides want to find a way to make something work." ➤ Once the biggest names on the market have been locked in, teams will be looking to find role players. One who has been drawing a lot of interest: PF **Eduardo Najera**, who helped his stock by extending his shooting range to the 3-point line. Some old friends—the Mavericks, and his old Mavericks coach, the Warriors' **Don Nelson**—are interested in Najera, along with the Nets, Hornets and his current team, the Nuggets.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Who's going? Who's staying? Keep up on the latest free-agent news at sportingnews.com.

such as Chauncey Billups and Steve Nash, but Davis felt he was worth more. When healthy, maybe he is. But Billups and Nash had played in more than 95 percent of their teams' games in the five years before they got their contracts.

Davis is coming off his first 82-game season since 2001-02, and when he is on the floor with the Clippers, he figures to make a mean team with Brand, a big man who can run the floor. But he'll have to be on the floor to matter. Another 82-game season is a long shot, but Davis needs to be healthy and play in 75-plus games. He has been dabbling in the movie business, but that will have to take second billing to basketball, even in Hollywood. "Baron has a lot of outside interests that sometimes distract him," one Warriors source says. "He could be so much better if he would only focus on basketball."

Chris Mullin. The Warriors' boss appears to be left holding the bag here. Davis was the glue that brought together the team's disparate elements—veteran coach Don Nelson, youngsters Monta Ellis and Andris Biedrins, entrenched regulars Stephen Jackson and Al Harrington. And fans loved him.

Mullin would be wise to take the cap space vacated by Davis' departure and protect it, allowing the team to begin a youth movement based around restricted free agents Ellis and Biedrins. But, in doing so, he would risk alienating a fan base energized by the team's Davis-led emergence. It's a no-win situation for Mullin. Thus, he might be facing the most pressure of all.

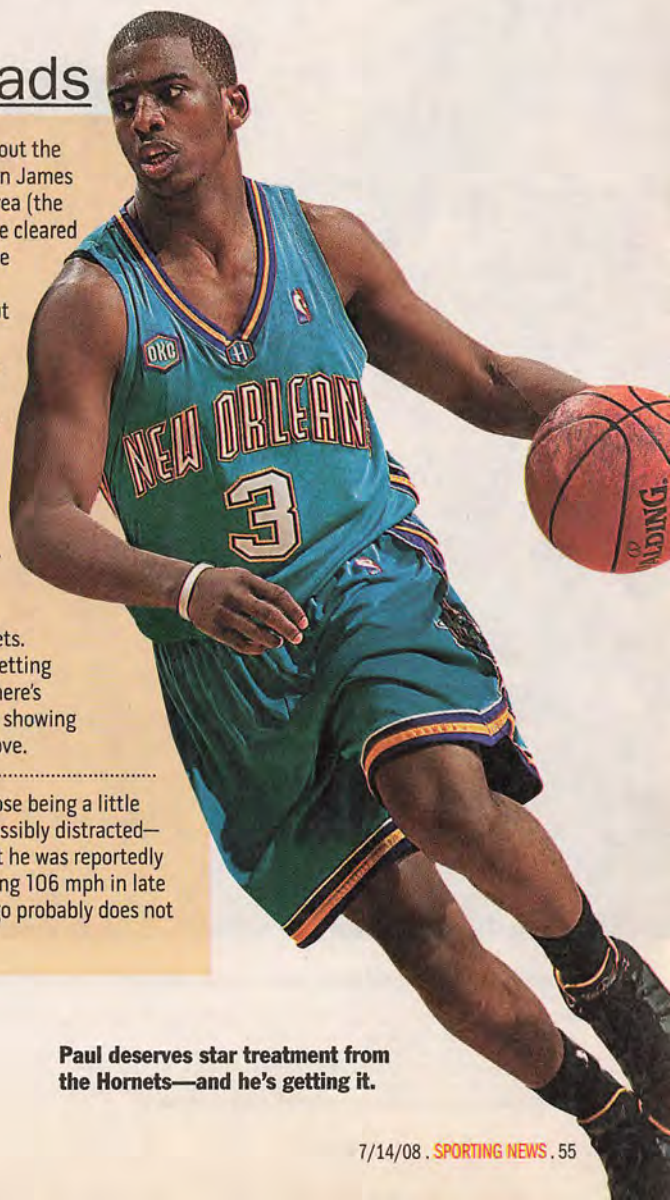
SN

speedreads

Much has been made about the flirtation between LeBron James and the New York City area (the Nets and the Knicks have cleared 2010 cap space to pursue James). That flirtation borders on tampering but does not cross into tampering territory. The reality is, everyone is trying to clear cap space for James and the bevy of quality free agents scheduled for the market in 2010.

Chris Paul got the maximum extension available from the Hornets. Credit New Orleans for getting the deal done quickly. There's something to be said for showing your star players some love.

Worried about Derrick Rose being a little too comfortable—and possibly distracted—in Chicago? The fact that he was reportedly pulled over at 3 a.m. doing 106 mph in late April in suburban Chicago probably does not help matters.



Paul deserves star treatment from the Hornets—and he's getting it.



EXPOSURE

On the bubble? Hardly

Michael Phelps—competing in a 200-meter butterfly heat last week at the U.S. Olympic Swimming Trials—put himself in position to break Mark Spitz's record for most gold medals in a single Olympics. Phelps, who won six golds in Athens in 2004, qualified to compete in eight events in August in Beijing. He's aiming for Spitz's mark of seven golds set at the 1972 Games.



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SPORTING NEWS won't be in it. We're taking a cue from baseball and getting in a short vacation. But don't worry. We'll be back, and we'll have everything you need to get ready for NFL training camps in our next issue.

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